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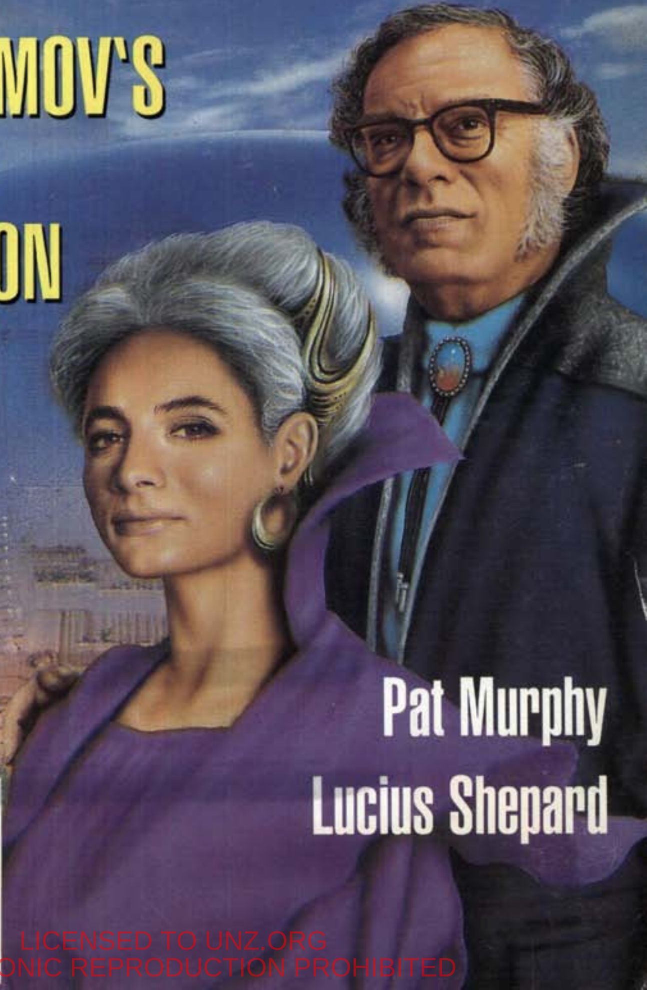

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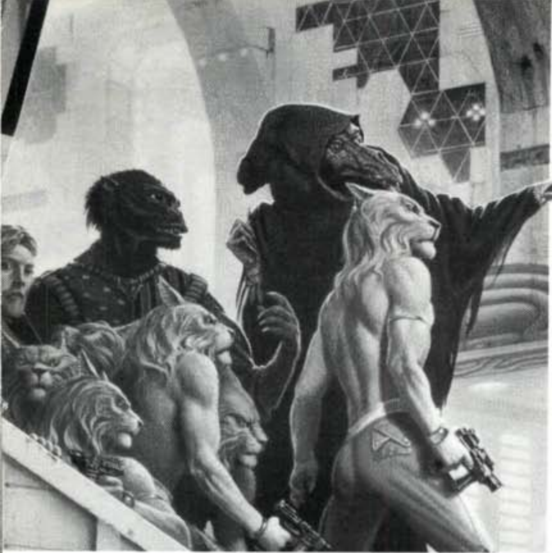

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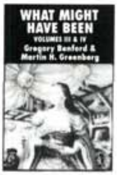
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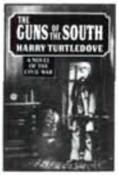
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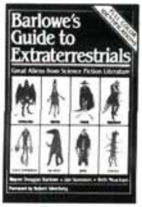
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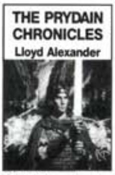
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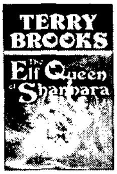
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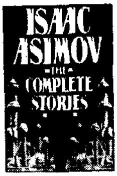
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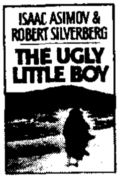
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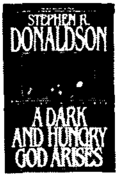
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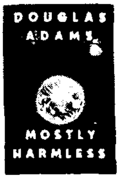
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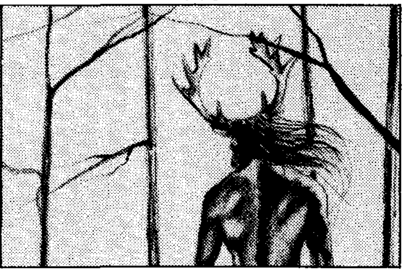

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

ISAAC HIMSELF

Janet Asimov

When asked to write an editorial about Isaac, I said I'd try. Well, I can't, not yet. Instead, Isaac Asimov will speak for himself—in what I heard him say (and wrote down, to his amusement), and from his unpublished letters. Nothing is in chronological order. My words are in brackets.

I have just sold (or think I have sold) a little science-fiction story written for first-graders out of a restricted vocabulary. It was very frustrating as an experience for I was forever trying to put together a couple of hundred words to say something, and it made me think of the manner in which the vast majority of people must put their thoughts into 500 or 1000 words at the most. Try it some day, and it will make it clearer to you how difficult it is to communicate and with what despair (perhaps unknowing despair) it must fill people to find themselves mute as far as anything but the most fundamental needs and responses are concerned. Imagine a person who stands before a beautiful sunset, or in front of some marvel of nature (or, for that matter, of technology), or before a beautiful girl—and literally has no words to express his feelings. It is a tragedy you and I have never experienced and therefore don't give a thought to, ordinarily, but it is a tragedy none the less. . . A sensitive soul may be imprisoned in an aborted mentality and must slowly wither for lack of expression. . . . When I was young I read a story in which someone spoke of the obligations of genius and expressed it by means of a parable. There is only so much intelligence to distribute among the human race and if it is distributed evenly, all men and women would be normally intelligent. However, it is necessary for the good of mankind that there be a few highly intelligent, creative individuals that create the science, literature and art that the rest enjoy. In order to create even one of those, a hundred ordinary people must be robbed of some of their intelligence—and all of that filched IQ crammed into one head. That has haunted me ever since. No, I don't actually and seriously admit to being a genius, but I am highly intelligent and creative, and I feel guilty about it in a way. In fact, I wonder how much of my hectic attempt to write science for the layman lies in a need to restore that filched IQ; to get the information I have stored, thanks to my IQ, and the understanding, and spread it out over paper for all to have.

[About a fan letter saying Isaac's books had changed the person's life.] I said [to someone] that that was what made life worth living, knowing that many thousands of people I had never seen were made happy by my books and would keep on being made happy after I died.

She said, "But you won't know that when you're dead." And I said, "I know it NOW. It's your own happiness that is of limited value because it dies when you die. It's other people's happiness that is immortal."

She said, "That's not why you write." And I said, "I know. I would write even if I never got any fan letters, but then I would have problems. Every once in a while I would wonder about my compulsion and think that perhaps I am wasting my life. Now I know I'm NOT."

I have already completed the first draft of the next book in the series . . . which was a foolish thing to do because I have other more important books to write, but I pamper myself so. When I feel like writing something, I go ahead and write it, on the theory that it will always come out better if I am moved to write it, while if I write A while I am secretly wanting to write B, then A won't be any good.

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* * *

I read about how authors can't stand their books when they're done because they don't live up to the ideal dream in their mind. Isn't it awful? That proves once again I am not a real writer but some kind of monstrosity. Because I love my books, and after they are published, I read them with vast pleasure, and every word is just what I wanted, and it turns out that I wrote my ideal book and I love everyone who joins me in loving them and so on. This goes for my fiction as well as my non-fiction. Does that mean there is something very seriously wrong with me?

You have no idea how responsible I feel as a science-writer. Every one of my library copies of my science books is margined with notes, bringing it up to date, correcting or extending it. Even if no additional edition is ever called for, I still must do this for myself.

I'm doing a section on Einstein's Relativity and my system for writing about something I have only the vaguest notion of is to close my eyes and type VERY VERY FAST.

Someone pointed out a horrible geographic error . . . I placed Lake Michigan between Lake Huron and Lake Erie instead of between Lake Huron and Lake Superior. . . . Oh dear, it is so embarrassing to pull a bad blooper in public. I risk it constantly . . . and considering the volume I turn out, the number of subjects I cover and the speed with which I do it, I make amazingly few bloopers (if I do say so myself) but that does not in the least diminish my embarrassment and horror when a blooper is discovered. [The editor] writes to me to say that just because I am a natural resource doesn't give me the right to switch geography.

It was once my ambition to be a history-writer . . . about twenty years ago I determined to write a history of World War II, read innumerable books and took about a million words of notes—which I still possess. It never came to anything, but it gave me many hours of happiness.

The editor and I went over my manuscript page by page and paragraph by paragraph. He corrected typoes and ineptness here and there. I have a great tendency to repeat words. If I say "control" in one sentence, I am likely to use it in the next four or five sentences, four or five times, and never notice. Also I get fits where every paragraph starts with "However"; I'm particularly strong on "However." The editor says that if sometime in the far future a book attributed to me is discovered in some kitchen midden, they can check whether it is authentically mine or not by measuring the density of "however"s.

I'm pretty temperamental about sounding untemperamental. I've

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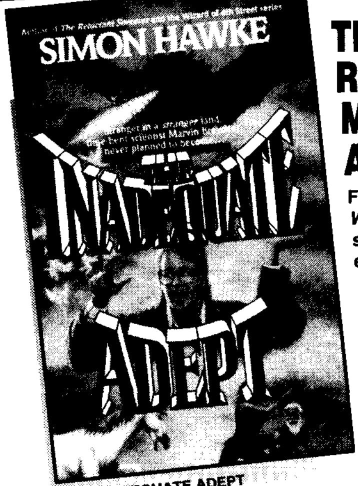

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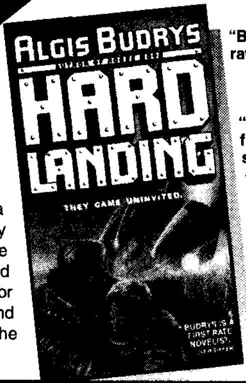

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thrown many a fit at any editorial suggestion that I'm the kind of author who throws fits. [You are a very stubborn man. Are you sure you're not part Swede?] Well, I'm Russian, and you know about Rurik. . . .

When I hear music that makes me feel happy, I know it's Tschaikovsky. When I hear music that makes me feel awed, I know it's Beethoven. And it's odd how Sousa and Strauss had the trick of writing original compositions that you already know. . . .

I watched the dentist make the mold and was fascinated by the gummy material he used, which was not plaster and which peeled out of the metal container so nicely, so I said, "what is that stuff?" And he said, "we call it alginate . . . obtained from seaweed . . ." and I had to listen patiently to a lecture on alginate, since there was no way of telling him that I was the author of the article on alginate in the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Good for me for forgetting.

To learn is to broaden, to experience more, to snatch new aspects of life for yourself. To refuse to learn or to be relieved at not having to learn is to commit a form of suicide; in the long run, a more meaningful type of suicide than the mere ending of physical life.

Knowledge is not only power; it is happiness, and being taught is the intellectual analog of being loved.

People keep asking me if I mind not teaching classes any more, but I still teach, through my books. I teach those who want to learn.

I wish more people would learn to glory in variety. They should learn that "All men are brothers" is not a theological statement but a biological one.

All my life I have been a great believer in equality of the sexes (arguing with Campbell bitterly on this point) and I think a woman should NOT submerge herself in a man (biologically, the reverse seems more appropriate, but let me eschew ribaldry). However, this feminist viewpoint breaks down in the case of true love. TRUE love can't be very common, it suddenly seems to me; particularly when combined with sensitivity, articulateness, and philosophic seeking after truth. Submergence of the woman is all right then, for the man submerges too and a greater unit DOES exist. . . .

Bright women learn to measure their responses to avoid seeming brighter than their male companions. Some learn to do it so automatically they forget how not to do it. Those women who resent the necessity feel such relief at meeting a man so secure as to not require the measuring of response that they are apt to fall in love on the spot. What such women sometimes fail to realize is that to the man the relief is equal. To any decently intelligent man, it is ruinous to sexual attraction to have to talk down always and forever.

There's a scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* when he's dead and Cleopatra is killing herself, and she says that when she goes to the Elysian fields all the ghosts will be jealous of her and Antony, only of course she had Shakespeare to say it for her.

[Isaac said this years before he got sick, but it brought both of us to tears and I said, "I want to be there with you."]

If the other girls let you, dear.

[Then he picked up Shakespeare and was horrified to find that it was Antony who said it when he thought Cleopatra was dead]. I think I made the mistake because I've always thought Antony was such an ass and Cleo had all the brains in the family.

[Why are you crying at breakfast!] I'm dripping into my cereal and making my milk salty. I'm reading that Greek poem about the Maltese dog. When I read the first line I knew I was in deep trouble. . . .

I couldn't sleep last night so I lay awake thinking of an article to write and I'd think and think and cry at the sad parts. I had a wonderful night.

* * *

There are so many things I want—and I am so glad that when I want them, I want them with all my heart. It is so safe to dole out your wantings very carefully in order not to lose too much if one of them doesn't come to pass. But I feel that life was not made to pickety-pickety-pickety along, buying non-pain at the price of non-life. What I want, I want all the way, and will pay for in the hard, golden currency of standing firm under bludgeon. I got my education by working for it one way or another, and I want to write, so I write HARD AND LONG. And sometimes, I don't get what I want. . . and it hurts terribly sometimes, but even the hurt is a symptom of life, and among all the dead things in the universe, it is a privilege to have the capacity to be hurt, if that means you know you are alive.

. . . We all have our illusions, of course. Thrice happy he who can abandon them cheerfully in time to exploit the actual with efficiency. But if that is not possible, then, it is still something to be able to abandon them under any circumstances. I am not one of those who thinks that illusions must be kept for the sake of the spurious comfort they give us. The religion that comforts people and deprives death of its terrors (Oh, death where is thy sting; Oh, grave where is thy victory), is a lovely thing to have, one would think; but then surely, so is the dull knowledge of present-alone that the ox has. Burns laments that the mouse whose nest he turned up with his plow is concerned only with present sorrow while he himself can look back with grief and forward with dread.

Homo sapiens alone of all the known objects in the universe can look forward to an inevitable death; he alone can look back with regret; he alone can sigh for the might-have-beens. It is the penalty of humanity. Shall we accept the gifts of humanity; the consciousness of beauty; the exaltation of abstractions; the knowledge that makes gods of us—and not accept the penalty, too? To refuse the penalty is to refuse the gifts; to live in a false world of our own making (whether the elaborate one of the saints and profits [in ink, in the margin, Isaac wrote "prophets—Freudian slip"] or the paltry one of day-dreaming) is to deprive ourself of the real world—and the real world, with all its faults, has a grandeur and glory for which there is no substitute. No vision of God and heaven ever experienced by the most exalted prophet can, in my opinion, match the vision of the universe as seen by Newton or Einstein. . . .

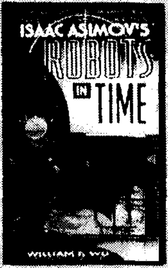
When I get sentimental . . . it occurs to me that one person can show another person the whole universe without moving from one spot—if the right two people are involved.

. . . a very remarkable thing, love—in its finest aspect there is and can be no distinction between giving and receiving. The two are one. And what higher gift can there be in the whole world and in all of existence than one which passes from one person to another though neither person can for life of him (or her) tell in which direction it is passing. Only then is there pure giving. There need be neither the embarrassment of gratitude nor the nastiness of felt obligation. The joy of giving and of receiving melts into a single joy that transcends both, and becomes divine . . . but I am babbling.

[Isaac watching "Lili" and crying during the dream ballet] I know why it makes me cry. It's like life—people go one by one and you say goodbye and goodbye, until the time comes when it's your turn to go and they say goodbye. I guess the important thing is Carpe Diem—seize the day—and then let it go.

. . . the soft bonds of love are indifferent to life and death. They hold through time so that yesterday's love is part of today's and the confidence in tomorrow's love is also part of today's. And when one dies, the memory lives in the other, and is warm and breathing. And when both die—I almost believe, rationalist though I am—that somewhere it remains, indestructible and eternal, enriching all of the universe by the mere fact that once it existed.

[Yes. Dear Isaac.] ●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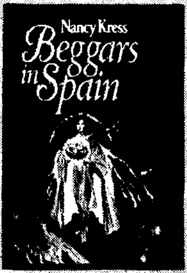
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art: Laurie Harden

Nadya Rybak was five years old when she realized that her family was not like other families. She was in the crossroads store, staring at the jars of candy on the high shelf behind the counter and wondering if her father might buy her a peppermint stick to suck during the wagon ride home. It was late spring in Missouri, and the wooden floorboards were warm against her bare feet.

She liked the store. The clutter of boxes and barrels intrigued her. Interesting smells clung to them: jerked beef, clarified butter, pickles, and spices. Her father leaned against the wooden counter in the back, talking with Mr. Evans, the storekeeper, about Indian trouble up north. Two fur traders had been killed the month before. Mr. Evans blamed all the trouble on whiskey and whiskey peddlers, and Nadya's father agreed.

Nadya's mother and Mrs. Evans sat on a bench near shelves that held bolts of fabric and sewing notions. A three-month-old issue of *Godey's Ladies Book,* worn from handling, lay open on Mrs. Evans's lap. Lottie Evans, a wide-eyed three-year-old, sat at her mother's feet, staring at Nadya. One chubby hand clutched her mother's skirt. She was fascinated by the older girl, but had not yet gathered her courage to approach.

A bearded man came in the door and threw a bundle of furs onto the counter. Nadya stared up at him with interest. He was a very shaggy man: his beard was long and unkempt; his hair needed cutting. He was wearing a buckskin coat, homespun pants, and a shirt that hadn't been changed any too recently. There hung about him—mingling with the usual man-smells of chewing tobacco, whiskey, and sweat—a strong smell of many animals. She smelled bear and deer and buffalo and beaver, but what caught her attention was the faint smell of wolf.

The man leaned against the counter, evidently content to wait for the storekeeper's attention. He glanced down at Nadya. "Hello there, young'un."

"Hello." The wolf smell came from the bundle of furs on the counter.

"You know, I've got a little sister back in New York that's not much older than you."

Nadya considered this gravely, but didn't say anything.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for my papa."

"Looked like you were watching those jars of candy back there." She nodded, and the man grinned. "Thought so. Well, maybe when I trade these furs, I'll buy you a piece of candy. Would you like that?"

Nadya nodded solemnly. She watched the man untie the rope that bound the furs together and spread the furs on the counter. She could smell wolf more strongly now. Emboldened by the man's grin, she reached up and touched one of the furs, a soft pelt the color of butter.

"That's a painter," the man said. "A mountain cat." He let her stroke the soft tawny fur, then lifted it aside. "Now here's a beaver pelt. Some fine gentleman in New York City will be wearing a hat made from that soon enough."

The man lifted the beaver pelt aside, revealing a fur that gave off a warm, reassuring scent, the scent of Nadya's mother on certain nights. Nadya reached up hesitantly to stroke the soft pelt. A layer of stiff gray guard hairs lay atop an undercoat of soft fur. She stroked the fur backwards to reveal the soft undercoat, and the long gray guard hairs tickled her hand.

"This 'un, I'll sell for the bounty," the man said. He lifted the fur off the counter and held it down where she could see it better. Where the animal's head should have been, there was a mask with vacant holes in place of eyes. The ears were shriveled; they had been pressed flat by the weight of the other furs.

Nadya stared at the empty eye-holes and took a step back, dropping her hand to her side. "Where did you get it?" she asked, suddenly wary. Until she saw that eyeless mask, she had not thought about where the fur had come from.

"From a wolf bigger than you are." He shook the pelt and the fur rippled. "Saw her prowling around the edge of my camp and got her with a single shot. Right through the head."

Nadya took another step back, glaring at the man.

"What's the matter, young'un? She's dead. Can't hurt you now."

"You shouldn't have done that," she cried shrilly. "You shouldn't have shot her."

She fled across the store to hide behind her mother's long skirt. Her mother put her hand on Nadya's head. "What is it, child? What's the matter?"

"He killed her. That man." Nadya pointed across the store at the bewildered trapper, who still held the wolf skin.

"I didn't mean to scare her, missus," he said apologetically. "I was just showing her some furs."

"It's all right," her mother said. She stooped and put her arm around Nadya's shoulders. She spoke softly. "Come, Nadya. We'll go out to the wagon to wait for Papa."

"Why did he kill the wolf, mama?"

"Hush," her mother said. "Hush now."

Nadya's mother took her hand and led her out the door. Nadya walked by her mother's side, carefully placing herself between her mother and the man who killed wolves. She would protect her mother.

"I didn't mean to scare her," he was saying.

Then they were out in the sunshine, away from the comforting and horrifying scent of the wolf fur. Nadya sat on the wagon seat and her mother explained, very softly, that the wolf the man had killed was not a person—not like Mama or Papa. That wolf was an animal, and it was not murder to kill it.

But her mother's voice trembled when she talked and she held Nadya's hand a little too tightly. Nadya knew that her mother was afraid of the man too. When her father came out of the store, he brought a new ax head, a box of supplies, and a few hard candies to comfort Nadya.

"He's a bad man," Nadya told her father.

"He just doesn't understand," her father said.

Nadya shook her head stubbornly. The world, which had always seemed so safe and secure, was suddenly a frightening place. She sucked on a hard candy and clung to her mother's hand, convinced that her father was wrong.

Dmitri Rybak, Nadya's father, had emigrated to America from a small Polish village. Marietta, her mother, had come from France. They had met in St. Louis, fallen in love, and moved West, looking for land where they could live their lives undisturbed.

At that time, Missouri had been a state for only a few years. According to the unreliable census figures of the time, the state had a population of 66,000 (not counting Indians or Negroes) scattered over its 69,000 or so square miles. Most of the folks were clustered along the Mississippi River. Only a few had ventured westward—trappers and traders and soldiers, for the most part.

Nadya's parents had settled on the Osage River in the southwest portion of the state, a hilly region of creeks and springs and few settlers. When they settled, there had been a trading post located where the river was shallow enough to ford. The Evans's store stood there now.

When Nadya was three, the mountain man who had run the trading post had moved on, selling his ramshackle building to Mr. Evans, who had improved and expanded the store to serve the needs of the farmers who were moving into the area. By the time Nadya was five, a tiny settlement had grown up around the store, including a blacksmith shop, a tavern, and a few houses.

After meeting the trapper in the store, Nadya became more careful of people outside her family, less willing to talk with strangers. On the whole, her new shyness affected her life relatively little—few strangers happened by their farm. And for the most part, Nadya's childhood was happy.

On long winter nights, when the farmyard was dusted with snow and hickory logs burning in the fireplace warmed the cabin, Dmitri taught her to read the *Farmer's Almanack*. They leaned over the book, huddling close to the pool of light cast by a wick burning in a cup of bear oil. Her father stumbled over the difficult words, but he persisted, determined that Nadya learn. While they labored over the book (learning that turnips should be planted in the dark of the moon and that a silver coin, placed in a butter churn, will help the butter come), Marietta watched from the fireside, mending or knitting.

With a pen made from a wild turkey quill, Dmitri taught Nadya to write. By the wavering light, Nadya painstakingly made marks on bark that her father had peeled from the shagbark hickory tree. She learned to write her name in English. Her father could write in another alphabet as well—the alphabet he had learned when he was a boy. But he only taught her the English writing, saying that she was an American and she should write as the Americans did.

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When Nadya's lessons were done, she would ask for a story.

"A story?" her father would say. "It's too late for a story." But he always smiled when he said it was too late.

"It's not too late," she would say. "There's time. Please, Papa. Just one story."

"Maybe there's time for one, Dmitri," Marietta would say. Then Dmitri would put aside the pen and the Almanack and he would lift his hands so that the light from the burning wick made wavering shadows on the deerskin that her mother had stretched across the window to keep the drafts out. The shadows that Nadya's father made with his hands were magical.

"Once upon a time, there was a man," her father said, and the shadows of his hands became the silhouette of a man's head—a man with a jutting chin and a big nose. "He lived in a cabin on the edge of the forest. And there was a rabbit who came to eat the vegetables in his garden." The shadows shifted and changed, becoming a rabbit that wiggled its nose and made Nadya giggle. "Every night the rabbit came and ate from the man's garden."

Dmitri told of how the man built a scarecrow to fool the rabbit. The rabbit ignored the scarecrow—it kept on hopping into the garden and eating all the vegetables. The man tried to keep the rabbit away by sitting in the garden all night long, but he always fell asleep. The shadow man snored noisily, and that made Nadya laugh.

"But," Nadya's father said, "on the night when the moon was full, the man changed."

Nadya watched with fascination as the shadow man shifted and became a wolf, a fierce shadow head that snapped at the air and lifted its snout to howl. The wolf chased the rabbit through the forest, growling and snapping.

"All night long, the wolf chased the rabbit and the rabbit ran from the wolf. When the moon set and the sun came up, the rabbit hid in its burrow, afraid to go near the man's garden. And the wolf became a man again."

Nadya watched the shadow wolf give way to the shadow man. Sometimes the shadow man sang a song and sometimes he howled like a wolf. Then Nadya and her mother howled too. If they howled long and hard, the wild wolves that lived in the forest heard them and joined in.

The story was always a little different, but it always involved the shadow man and the shadow wolf. Nadya never grew tired of watching one become the other.

Of course, on nights when the moon was full, there were no lessons and no stories. In the summer, there were romps, where her mother and father, in their other form, would play tag with Nadya in the farmyard by the cabin door. In the winter, the she-wolf would cuddle Nadya, letting the child stroke her soft fur and snuggle against her warm belly. When Nadya was seven years old—old enough to be trusted to stay away from the fire—her mother and father would go running at night, leaving her alone until morning. She was lonely then, sad that she could not go running with her parents. But her mother told her that when she grew up, she would Change when the full moon rose. And then they would run together. She had to be content with that.

Since Nadya had no brothers and sisters, she helped her mother and father in equal part: doing womanly chores with her mother and helping her father with the farming, acting more like a son to her father than a daughter. When she was nine years old, she helped her father plow. Her job was to ride the mule to steady it while her father rode the plow. She loved that—the aroma of the newly turned earth, the warmth of the mule beneath her, the solid shifting of the animal's muscles as it strained to pull the plow through the soil. Her father whistled and shouted to the mule, and sang folk songs in French and Polish.

The summer that she was ten, her father taught her to shoot. As a target, he set a pinecone on a stump in the field. All that first week, he took her down to the field in the early evening. She would hold the rifle to her shoulder and practice pointing it at the pinecone and pulling the trigger.

After a week of sighting on the pinecone, he let her try shooting with powder. The first time she tried, the kick of the explosion bruised her shoulder and nearly knocked her down. But she was not frightened and she tried it again and again, until she could hit the pinecone square with every shot. She hunted squirrels in the forest near the house, aiming for the bark just below the animal's feet. The shot shattered the bark and the concussion killed the squirrel, leaving the meat untouched.

As she grew older, she and her father went hunting for larger game. At night, they hunted deer, mesmerizing the animals with a torch made from a pine knot or a rag soaked in bear oil and lashed to a stick. By day, they hunted turkey or bear, in season.

Nadya's long skirts were a hindrance when she went hunting, rustling against the grass and catching on every burr and thorn. Over her mother's protests, she stitched herself a pair of homespun trousers. "There is no one here to see," her father said. "Let the girl be comfortable."

Nadya was a good hunter—she had a better eye than her father, and she brought in most of the meat for the family table. In the fall of her twelfth year, determined to earn a rifle of her own, she hunted bears for their skins and oil and meat.

She always wore a dress to town—her mother insisted on that. One Sunday afternoon, Nadya and her father took the bear oil and skins to the store and offered them in trade for a new, muzzle-loading Hawkins rifle. Mr. Evans accepted the trade, but seemed puzzled when Nadya lifted the gun from the counter and sighted along its barrel. He frowned at Dmitri. "You're letting your daughter choose your rifle?" he murmured.

"Her rifle," Dmitri corrected. "She killed the bears. Only seems right she should choose the rifle. After all, she's a better shot than I am."

The men who were lounging by the Franklin stove glanced up. "The girl killed eight bears?" one man asked.

"Ten," Dmitri said. "We kept the skins and meat from two for our own use."

"D'you mind if I try it?" Nadya asked Mr. Evans.

"As you like," he said.

They stepped onto the porch of the store, with Nadya carrying the rifle easily at her side. The men from the store followed. Nadya loaded the rifle, carefully pouring black powder into the barrel, tamping it in place, inserting cotton wadding and a bullet. She looked around then, searching for a target.

"You see that nail in the fence across the way," said one of the loiterers from the store. "I knew a man in Kentucky who could hit a nail like that and drive it home."

Nadya glanced at the man's grinning face. He was laughing at her, and she did not like it. She squinted at the fence across the road, where the rusty head of a nail protruded from a post. "All right," she said easily, lifted the rifle, and fired a single shot. The nail disappeared into the wood, leaving a dark hole where the bullet had struck.

"This rifle will do," Nadya said to her father. They returned to the store, leaving the loiterers staring at the fence.

In her fourteenth year, Nadya noticed that the world was changing around her. It began when the bargers started calling to her. She had heard people at the store say that the men who steered flatboats down the river were a bad lot—drinking, fighting, and stealing when they could. But Nadya had always liked the look of them. They seemed so much at ease floating down river, leaning back among the crates of apples and barrels of salt pork, playing the harmonica or singing. She had always waved at the bargers, and they had always waved back. But in her fourteenth year, they started shouting when they waved. "Come along with us, little sweetheart!" There was something leering and wicked in the way they said it, and she stopped waving after that.

Then a Yankee peddler stopped at the farm to show her mother his stock of sewing notions and such. He gave Nadya a blue satin ribbon for no reason at all. He said that it would look pretty in her dark hair, and when he held it up so that she could see it, his smell changed ever so slightly. She did not know what to say. He watched her so intently, like a hungry dog with its eye on the hoecakes. When her mother nudged her, she thanked him awkwardly.

After dinner that night, Nadya's mother brought out her cards. She kept them wrapped in a silk scarf on the same shelf with the Bible and the *Farmer's Almanack*. Nadya knew the cards well: when she was a child, she had often played with them, fingering their gilded edges and admiring the pictures of strange people in strange costumes. She would sort the cards according to suit: separating the swords, the coins, the wands, and the cups, and setting aside the special cards that did not fall into any suit. The words on these cards were written in French: *Le Diable*, The Devil; *Le Monde*, The World; *Le Mat*, the Fool.

Her mother did not read the cards often. But when there was a decision to be made—like whether to plant early or wait—she would lay the cards on the rough wood of the table, studying the bright pictures. She would shake her head over certain cards—a burning tower, a man hanging upside down—while she and Dmitri conferred in soft murmurs.

That night, when Dmitri went out to check on the cattle, Nadya's mother beckoned Nadya to sit beside her. "That trader," her mother said, "You caught his eye." She unwrapped the cards and spread the silk scarf on the table. "What did you think of that?"

Nadya shifted uncomfortably on the wooden chair. "I didn't like the way he watched me."

"He wanted you," she said. "The way a man wants a woman. It's that simple."

Nadya looked down at her hands, suddenly shy. Her mother had always talked of such things matter of factly, without shame.

"I'd guess that the Change will be coming to you with the next full moon," her mother said. She sat back in her chair, holding the cards loosely in her lap. "With the Change, there comes a power. Being wanted—that's part of the power. You need to understand that men will admire you, men will lust after you."

Nadya looked up at her mother's serene face. "What do I do about that?" Nadya asked.

Her mother smiled. "Don't look so worried, *chérie*. This is not a bad thing." She shuffled the cards, her eyes on Nadya. "We will read the cards for guidance." When Nadya cut the deck, her mother restacked the cards and began to lay them face-up on the scarf in a cross-shaped pattern. "You are strong-minded—that's bad and good. Bad because it will lead you into trouble; good because it will keep the trouble from overwhelming you."

Nadya studied the cards. In the center of the pattern was the ten of coins, a card that pictured a happy family gathered together. The ten of coins was crossed and half-covered by *La Lune*, The Moon. On this card, two dogs howled at a frowning moon. There were other cards she recognized. In her future was the knight of swords, charging rashly forward on a gray horse. She saw *Le Diable*, a frightening figure with a man and a woman in chains at his feet; *La Mort*, a skeleton clutching a sickle; *La Maison Diu*, a castle struck by lightning.

"Ah," her mother said softly. "Perhaps this is not the best time for a reading."

"Tell me what it is, Mama."

Her mother stared at the cards. "Pain and destruction."

"When is it coming?" Nadya looked at the door, as if expecting the Devil to walk through it. "What can I do?"

"It is coming with a young man," her mother said. "He charges forward—reckless and brash—and he carries death in his hands."

Her mother dealt more cards, still shaking her head. "We will try again on another day," she said at last. She swept the cards from the scarf and shuffled them together.

That night, Nadya heard her mother and father murmuring softly by the fireside. Nadya listened, but she could not make out the words.

Three days later, when the full moon rose over the forest, the Change came to Nadya. She went running with her mother and father, and life was never the same after that.

Back in 1823, Mr. Hekiziah Jones attended a Methodist revival, a tent meeting that had brought in hundreds of devout Christians and an equal number of curiosity seekers from surrounding towns. Mr. Jones fell into the second category—a hard-drinking young man, he hoped to have a little fun and maybe win a few Christians over to the ways of sin.

Mr. Jones drank a great deal on Saturday night. On Sunday morning, overcome with a hangover and influenced by the persuasive sermon of a Methodist preacher, he renounced the Devil, swore that he would never again touch the demon rum, and, just incidentally, proposed to Cordelia Walker, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who had given up all hope of matrimony. Before Mr. Jones could change his mind, the preacher married the happy couple to the cheers of the crowd.

The first two vows were transitory—Mr. Jones returned to sin and drinking as soon as he possibly could. But the new Mrs. Jones was not so easily dismissed. Determined to save Mr. Jones' soul, she made an honest man of him—a farmer, no less. They emigrated to Kentucky, where he scratched out a living on a poor farm and Mrs. Jones bore him four strapping sons. Mrs. Jones' oldest son, Rufus, took after his father in his fondness for drinking and hunting and gambling and womanizing.

The year that Nadya turned eighteen, the Jones family emigrated again, this time to Missouri. That spring, the Jones family attended the wedding of Zillah Shaw, daughter of a prosperous farmer, to Samuel Prentice, a lanky farmboy.

The celebration was in the barn, which had been cleared of livestock for the occasion. The dirt floor was strewn with clean straw. Rufus Jones stood by the open door with a group of men. They passed a green jug of Mr. Shaw's fine home-brewed whiskey from hand to hand. The sun was setting and Rufus' shadow stretched all the way across the open floor of the barn.

The women were clearing away the remnants of the wedding feast. Children were running around the barn floor, whooping like Indians, and four young dogs were chasing them. At the far end of the barn, a fiddler was tuning his instrument for the dance to come. The air smelled of smoke, venison, and manure.

Rufus took a pull on the whiskey jug to ward off the evening chill, then passed the jug to his father. Hekiziah took a long pull, swallowing several times before he paused for breath. "Those are almighty ugly dogs," he said, squinting his good eye at the young hounds that romped with the children. Hekiziah had lost his other eye in a fight with an eye-gouging boatman before Rufus was born. He wore a patch over the empty socket.

"If they take after their mama, they'll be fine hunters," Mr. Shaw said. "She's as fine a bitch as ever treed a painter."

Hekiziah took another pull from the bottle, then reluctantly passed it to the next man. "That so? You do much hunting in these parts?"

Mr. Shaw nodded, taking the bait. "Not much choice in the matter. Man's got to hunt to keep the varmints out of his stock."

Rufus had heard this conversation before. By the time the bottle was empty, he guessed that his father would have turned the conversation from hunting to shooting and from shooting to who was the best shot. Soon enough, there would be talk of a shooting match with, most likely, a bottle of whiskey as the prize. Rufus was a good shot, and Hekiziah took advantage of that skill whenever he could.

Rufus made himself comfortable, leaning back against the barn wall and watching the girls primp and flutter around the fiddler. Mrs. Jones had taught Rufus to be polite and soft-spoken with the ladies. His father had taught him to get away with whatever he could. The combination was dangerous. In Kentucky, he had courted the sweet young daughter of a nearby farmer, taking her berry-picking in the warm days of Indian summer. He had left Kentucky just in time to avoid the consequences of those berry-picking expeditions.

The fiddler finished his tuning and played a reel. Rufus watched as the dancers formed two lines, stamping their feet in time with the music. Light from the setting sun faded. After the third dance, two of the older Shaw boys climbed into the rafters to light lanterns filled with bear oil. The burning wicks cast pools of yellow light, leaving only the corners in shadow.

It took a bit longer than Rufus expected for talk to turn to a shooting match. Mr. Shaw talked about a painter hunt last fall and about a wolf pack that roved along the river the winter just past. But eventually Hekiziah brought the conversation around.

"I reckon it's the water of Kaintuck," Hekiziah said. "Don't rightly know what else it could be. It must be something that makes the hunters of that state the sharpest-eyed riflemen around."

Mr. Shaw frowned and shook his head. His cheeks and nose were ruddy from drinking. "That just ain't so, Hekiziah. Why my own boys are sharp as any you'll find in Kentucky."

"I'd have to put that to the test before I could agree," Hekiziah said easily. "My boy Rufus is a right fine shot." He hefted the whiskey bottle, which had returned to his hand and lingered there. "Maybe a shooting match could settle the matter."

"All right then, a shooting match," Mr. Shaw agreed. His voice was loud and a little slurred. "With a bottle of whiskey to the winner." He glanced down. Two of the young dogs were wrestling on the barn floor. "And the pick of the litter as well."

"What's the target?" Rufus asked quietly.

Mr. Shaw glanced out the barn door at the dark fields. "A candle-snuffing, I'd say. That sit well with you?"

Rufus shrugged. "One target is as good as another."

In a snuffing contest, the target was the flame of a candle. The idea was not to snuff the candle out—that would be too easy a shot. Instead, the marksman had to shoot away the snuff, the charred part of the candle's wick, without putting out the flame. When the snuff was removed, the flame would brighten. Shoot too close to the candle, and the flame would die. Shoot too far away, and you would miss the wick altogether.

"Boys!" Mr. Shaw shouted over the music of the fiddle. He stamped his feet and shouted again. "Boys, listen here!" The fiddler stopped playing in the middle of a dance. "We're having a shooting match. Mr. Jones here says that his boys from Kentucky can beat anyone from Missouri hands down. Adam, run to the house and fetch a candle. Jack! William! All the rest of you! Get your rifles."

The young men who had been dancing abandoned their partners and scattered to fetch their rifles. When Adam returned with a tallow candle, Mr. Shaw took a flaming torch from the cooking fire and led the way out into the fields. Rufus walked at his father's side. The ground was damp and the air held the scent of spring growth. The sky was overcast. Moonlight illuminated the clouds from behind, creating a silvery patch of light in the eastern sky.

Like many settlers, Mr. Shaw had cleared new land by girdling the trees—removing a strip of bark all around the trunk. Without the bark, the tree died, and the settler cut it down. In the spring, when the ground was soft, the farmer grubbed out the stumps. In Mr. Shaw's field, the stumps of girdled trees—now stripped of all their bark and pale in the torchlight—stood as a reminder of the forest that had once covered his land.

Grass had sprouted between the stumps. Beyond the field, where the uncleared forest stood, the darkness grew thicker. A chorus of crickets, singing in the field and the forest, almost drowned out the fiddle music from the barn.

Mr. Shaw led the way to the far side of the field, where a low, flat-topped stump stood on the edge of the forest. He wedged the candle into a crack in the stump and lit the wick with his torch. He gave Adam the torch. "Now you stay here, boy," he advised his son. "Call out when the snuff is long enough for shooting, then get back."

The men moved away from the stump, walking toward the barn until Mr. Shaw said, "That'll do." In the still air, the candle flame stood steady, a sliver of yellow light against the darkness of the forest.

"Three shots apiece," Hekiziah suggested, and Mr. Shaw agreed.

Jack, Mr. Shaw's oldest son, took the first shot, standing with his feet spread wide, his rifle set firmly against his shoulder. His shot went

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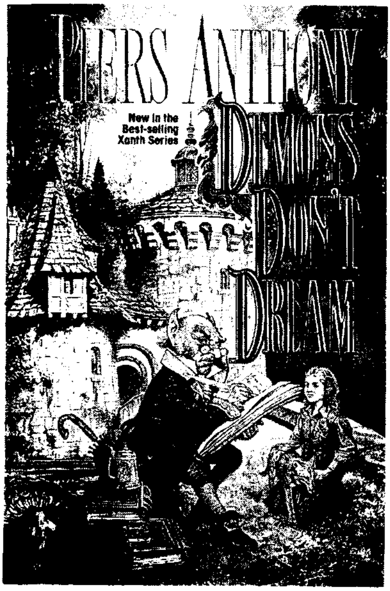
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high—the distant flame flickered as the ball passed over. The chorus of crickets fell silent for a moment, and then began again, as loud as before.

Jack paused to reload. His second shot was low, cutting the wick and putting out the candle. While Adam was relighting the candle, Jack took a pull from the whiskey jug.

"Move farther away from there," Jack called to Adam when the candle was burning once again. "That damned torch is blinding me."

He took his third shot and the flame flickered and then brightened.

"Dead on!" Adam called.

Jack grinned at his father and the others. "Who'll be next?" he asked.

One by one, the other men shot. Several missed the candle with all three shots. Two others snuffed the candle one time out of three.

Rufus did not shoot until all the others had taken their turns. Then he lifted his rifle and squinted at the candle. In the blue heart of the flame, the charred portion of the wick curled in a long crescent.

He held his breath, steadying the rifle and sighting on that dark crescent. His first shot was perfect: the flame brightened and he smiled as he set the rifle down and reloaded.

"Fool's luck," he said to Mr. Shaw, before Mr. Shaw could say the same to him.

He took a pull from the whiskey bottle while he waited for the candle to burn down. The men around him were quiet. In the field and woods around them, crickets sang in a relentless chorus. "Ready!" Adam called at last.

Rufus lifted his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off the second shot. The candle flickered—a miss.

"Your luck is passing," Mr. Shaw said in a good-natured tone.

"One more shot," Hekiziah said. "Give the boy a fair chance."

Rufus reloaded and lifted his rifle for the last shot. He braced himself, setting his feet wide apart and sighting carefully. The candle flickered and brightened for the second time.

Hekiziah whooped and clapped Rufus on the back. "Fine shooting, son. Almighty fine shooting. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Shaw?"

Hekiziah held his hand out to Mr. Shaw, but Mr. Shaw just frowned at him, shaking his head like a bull disturbed by flies. He squinted at the men around him.

"We're not quite done," Mr. Shaw said in a belligerent tone. "There's one other who ought to shoot. One other who ain't here. You just hold on. You all just wait here."

He left them standing in the field and hurried in the direction of the barn. The cloud cover had broken and the half moon cast an uncertain light over the group. Rufus looked around at the others. By the moonlight, he could see them grinning, as if at a private joke.

"Who is he getting?" Hekiziah asked Jack uneasily. "Seems like most every man came with us."

"You just wait," Jack said. "You'll see. Best shot in these parts."

A few minutes later, Rufus saw three figures emerge from the barn and come across the field. As they approached, he realized that one of them was a woman. Her dark hair was braided and the braids were tied with ribbons and coiled on her head. With her left hand, she held her skirt so that the hem did not drag in the mud. She walked with a careful, mincing step, as if she were unaccustomed to wearing shoes. Under her right arm, she carried a muzzle-loading rifle. Another man, a farmer with a broad peasant face, followed behind Mr. Shaw and the woman.

Mr. Shaw performed introductions. "Mr. Jones, this is Miss Nadya Rybak and her father, Mr. Dmitri Rybak. It seemed to me that Miss Rybak should take a turn."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Rybak," Hekiziah said uncertainly.

She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were on the distant candle flame.

"Now, Miss Nadya," Mr. Shaw was saying. "You see that candle over there." He explained the rules of the contest and she listened, nodding to show that she understood. Then she glanced at her father and he nodded approval.

"It's ready," Adam called from his post by the candle. In the distance, Rufus could see the bobbing torch as the boy moved to a safe distance.

"Shoot when you're ready, Miss Nadya," Mr. Shaw said.

She planted her feet wide, getting a secure footing on the rough ground. She put her rifle to her shoulder, then frowned and lowered it again. She murmured something to her father—Rufus could not make out the words—and Mr. Rybak shrugged. She handed him the rifle and bent to unlace her shoes. That done, she pulled the shoes off and stood barefoot on the cold ground. She nodded with satisfaction and took her rifle, lifting it with greater confidence than before.

The rifle was barely to her shoulder when she squeezed off the first shot. The flame flickered and then flared brightly.

Nadya took the rifle from her shoulder and waited for the snuff to grow long enough to shoot again. The men waited in silence, looking away into the darkness. Mr. Rybak stood at his daughter's side.

The woman glanced in Rufus's direction, catching him staring. Rather than dropping her eyes, she returned his stare. Her eyes were dark in the moonlight.

"Ready," Adam called out, and Nadya turned to face the candle. Again, she set her feet carefully and lifted the rifle smoothly to her shoulder. A faint breath of wind toyed with the wisps of hair that had escaped her braids. In the distance, the candle flame flickered and threatened to go out. She waited with the rifle at her shoulder until the flame steadied. Her second shot was as good as the first. The flame brightened and burned white.

She did not fidget as she waited for the flame to burn away the wick so that she could shoot again. She lowered the rifle and stood at ease, ignoring the men around her. The whiskey bottle passed from hand to hand. Mr. Rybak took a pull, then touched Nadya's arm. She wet her lips, glanced at the candle, then accepted the bottle and drank. She handed the bottle to Rufus. Her fingers brushed his as he took the bottle—a warm touch in the cool night air.

The candle burned low and Adam called out that she could shoot again. Rufus watched her lift the rifle a third time.

Her third shot was perfect—straight through the snuff. "Good shooting," Mr. Shaw exclaimed. "Fine shooting. Well worth a jug of whiskey, Miss Nadya."

The men returned to the barn in a knot of excitement and noise. Rufus walked with the others, avoiding his father. Hekiziah did not like to be disappointed and Rufus thought it just as well to stay out of his way for a time. He also wanted to get a look at Nadya Rybak in a better light.

In the barn, the table had been cleared away and the fiddler was just starting a tune. A line of couples was forming for a reel, but Nadya was not among them. Rufus looked for her, strolling around the dance floor and peering into the shadowy corners. He tipped his hat to the group of young women who had gathered in one corner. There were some pretty girls there, but he had his mind fixed on Miss Nadya. He made his way to the corner of the barn where the men were drinking.

"I don't see Miss Nadya," he said to Tom Williams, the son of the man who ran the blacksmith shop in town.

Tom shrugged. "I don't believe I've ever seen her dancing. I suppose she doesn't care for it."

"Have you ever tried to persuade her to change her mind? She's a handsome girl," Rufus said.

Tom looked startled. "I never thought of that. I reckon she is. But I expect that trying to change her mind is a waste of time. She's an odd one. Standoffish."

"You think so? I'd wager that I could change her mind."

"You think so? I doubt it."

"How about betting four bits on the proposition. If I don't have her out there dancing by the end of the evening, you win."

Tom nodded. "I'll take you up on that."

"Than I guess I'll see if I can find her." Rufus took a gourd cup and a bottle of cider, crossed the barn to the open door, and stepped outside.

The barnyard was crowded with the farm wagons that had carried the guests to the celebration. He strolled among the wagons. On the far side of the barnyard, he saw a woman leaning against the split rail fence, gazing into the empty field. She turned her head as he approached, and he recognized Nadya Rybak.

"How do, Miss Nadya," Rufus said. "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Rufus Jones. My father just bought some land by the river not far from here."

"How do," she said politely.

"That was fine shooting. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Her voice was even; she did not seem particularly interested in talking with him.

"I've never known such a pretty girl to be such a fine shot." He poured

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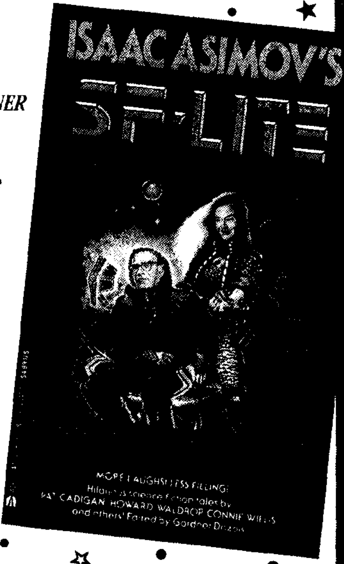
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cider into the cup. "Would you care for a drink of cider? Shooting is thirsty work."

She studied his face, then accepted the cup. By her expression, he guessed that she was not used to flattery. He leaned against the railing beside her. "Mr. Shaw was pleased that you won," he said.

She shook her head. "Not at all. He was pleased that you lost. He's a stiff-necked old Yankee."

He grinned. She was plain-spoken enough. "But surely you're no Yankee."

She shrugged. "We're foreigners, by his lights. But he'd rather lose to a foreigner than a man from Kentucky."

"Well, if I had to lose to someone, I'm happy to lose to you, Miss Nadya. Have you picked out your prize yet?"

She frowned and returned the cup to him. "Mr. Shaw gave me a bottle of whiskey."

"He also promised the pick of the litter. You can get yourself a dog."

She shook her head. "I don't care for dogs."

"Mr. Shaw makes great claims for these dogs. Fine hunters, he says. Perhaps your father. . . ."

"My father won't have a dog on the place. He likes them no better than I do."

Rufus shook his head, amazed. Just about every frontier farm had a few dogs around—to warn against intruders, to bark when varmints attacked the livestock. "I had heard you were a hunter. I'm surprised any hunter would turn down a dog."

"I hunt alone," she said. "I don't need a yapping dog to scare away the game."

He drained the cup, filled it again, and offered it to her. She took it from his hand.

"I had hoped I might have the honor of a dance," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't care to dance."

"That's kind of you. I'm sure if you elected to dance, you'd put the others girls to shame."

She looked away from him, gazing out at the open field once again. He thought he might have overdone the flattery, but then she spoke softly. "Never learned how."

"Never learned how to dance? Why that's foolish. You move with such a natural grace. You could learn all you needed in a minute." He hesitated, then said, "I could teach you right now, if you'd like."

She glanced at his face.

"Right now," he said, setting the cider jug on the ground and balancing the cup on the fence post. He held his arms out to her. "It won't take a minute."

"I can't," she said, standing with her back to the fence.

"Listen to the music," he said, tapping his foot in time to the fiddle tune. "Here now: I'll bow to you." He bent at the waist, grinning at her.

"And you curtsy to me." She bobbed in an awkward curtsy. "Give me your hand and we'll begin."

She reached out and he took her hands in his. Her hands were small and warm, rough from farm work.

"Tap your foot along with the music," he said. "That's good. Now we step forward and back. That's right. Now left hand circle." He held one hand and led her in a circle. "Right hand circle." Again, she followed obediently. "Swing your partner." He swung her, keeping time with the distant fiddle. "Very good. Promenade now." He pulled her into the promenade position and led her around a farm wagon. Her body was warm against his side.

She was a cooperative partner, moving with him easily. "You're a fine dancer," he said when the music ended.

She smiled at him for the first time. Her face was a little flushed, and a few more wisps of hair had escaped her braids. She looked charming. "You think so?"

"Without a doubt. You come to it naturally. Why don't you come inside and we can join the others."

She shook her head. "I don't care to."

The music started again, a slow tune in a waltz time. He cocked his head to listen. "I'll teach you a dance that's all the rage in Paris," he said. "A dancing teacher who was passing through Kentucky taught it to me. Would you like to learn it?"

He smiled at her. The dancing teacher had told him that the waltz was a fine excuse to hold a girl closer than propriety would ordinarily allow. She held out her hands, and he pulled her close, slipping one arm around her waist and holding her other hand in his.

"Now step as I do. One, two, three; one, two, three; one, two, three. . . ."

She was so close that he could feel the warmth of her body. Just a few thin layers of cloth separated his hand from her waist. Her face was just inches from his.

He stopped counting and began to hum softly along with the fiddle tune. Perhaps he couldn't persuade her to dance with him in the barn. But he might persuade her to spend a little time with him alone. That would be worth losing the wager. He adjusted his hand at her waist, pulling her a little closer.

Nadya stopped in mid-step and pulled away. "I'd best be going," she said suddenly.

"In the middle of a dance?" he said.

She took two steps back. "Yes. I think it's best." She wet her lips. "Thank you for teaching me." She stooped by the fence and retrieved her shoes.

"I would be happy to continue the lesson. I wish you wouldn't run off."

She shook her head and cast a quick look over her shoulder at the barn. "I must be going." She turned away, then hesitated and turned back. "If you would like the dog Mr. Shaw promised to me, you are welcome to have it. You can tell him I said so."

She hurried away then, carrying her shoes. She did not look back. Rufus watched her go, cursing his bad luck. After a bit, he wandered back into the barn. A few moments later, Tom found him in the shadows, watching the dancers.

"No luck," Tom said. "I told you she didn't care for it."

Rufus fished in his pocket and silently paid Tom the money he owed.

A week later, on the day of the full moon, Nadya was in the garden, chopping at weeds with a grubbing hoe and loosening the soil for the spring planting. The breeze was warm and the newly turned soil reeked of rotting leaves and grubs—rich, inviting smells.

"Hello, the house!" She heard a man's voice calling and straightened from her hoeing, grateful for the interruption. She saw a man riding into the farmyard on a gray horse.

Nadya hurried toward the cabin. By the time she reached the farmyard, Rufus Jones had tied his horse to the split rail fence and was greeting her mother politely. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Rybak," he was saying. "How do you do, Miss Nadya?"

Nadya nodded a greeting. Rufus had been hunting and he gave her mother one of the two turkey hens that hung from his saddle. He was saying something about his father feeling a mite poorly and about how Mrs. Evans in the store thought Mrs. Rybak might have a remedy that would ease his stomach.

Nadya's mother nodded, allowing that she had some herbs that might help. She dried her hands on her apron. "I'll get them right away."

"Would you like some tea?" Nadya asked Rufus. She glanced at her mother.

"Don't you want to hurry home to bring the herbs to your father?" her mother asked, frowning at Nadya.

"He was sleeping when I left," Rufus said. "Surely it won't hurt just to stop for a cup of tea. Just to be neighborly."

"Of course not," Nadya said. "Just sit a spell, and then go back."

"Of course," her mother said. There was starch in her voice. "That would be lovely." She looked at Nadya thoughtfully. "Perhaps you'd best go fetch some water from the spring. Mr. Jones, come and sit down."

"Oh, I'll help Miss Nadya with the water," he said quickly.

"Don't be foolish, Mr. Jones," Nadya's mother said sharply. Then she smiled and spoke in a soothing tone. "You are our guest. Come and sit."

"I must insist," Rufus said. "My mother has taught me to help out whenever I visit. If Miss Nadya can show me the way to the spring, I'll carry the buckets."

"Here's the bucket." Nadya picked up the wooden bucket that stood by the door. "I'll show you the way." She started away down the path.

"Fine weather, ain't it?" Rufus said.

Nadya nodded. She had wanted to be alone with Rufus again, but now

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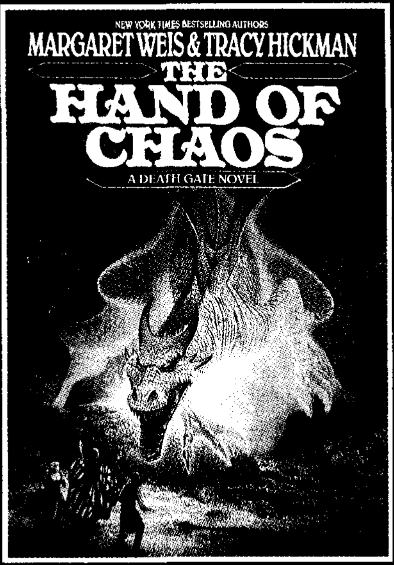
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she did not know what to say. She glanced back to see her mother standing by the cabin door, her hands knotted in her apron. She sensed something waiting under the surface, something surprising and new. When Rufus glanced at her, she felt a flush of warmth on her face.

"Here—I'll carry that." He took the bucket from her hand and she felt his warm fingers brush against hers. The sensation was disturbing. When she was younger, she had walked along the top rail of the split rail fence, balancing carefully. The feeling in her stomach reminded her of the inevitable moment when she teetered, just for a moment, before falling. She was losing her balance, teetering on an edge that she could not even see.

A moment later, he held his free hand out to her, offering to help her over a muddy patch. She hesitated. She walked this path a dozen times a day and never needed anyone's help. But she wanted to see how his touch affected the feeling in her stomach. She took his hand. The feeling in her stomach intensified: a strange fluttering, almost like hunger, but not quite.

She knew about sex. She had seen the hog mating with the sow in the mud of the barnyard and she had seen a stallion mount a mare down at the livery stable. Once, in the dusty road by the store, she had seen the blacksmith's dog and the storekeeper's bitch stuck together. The bitch had snapped and snarled and tried to run away, but the dog had clung to her, hugging her from behind. The two of them yelped and growled and scrabbled in the dust.

Mrs. Evans had shooed Nadya inside just as Mr. Evans threw a bucket of water over the pair. The two animals split up and ran helter-skelter in different directions. Just before Mrs. Evans blocked Nadya's view, she caught a glimpse of the dog's shiny penis, bright red between his bowed black legs.

When Nadya had asked her mother about the dogs, her mother had explained. She told Nadya about men and women, giving biological details about what goes where. Nadya had thought the whole thing quite unlikely: why would anyone do such an odd thing?

Just a month after the incident with the dogs, Nadya's friend Lottie Evans had loaned Nadya a book in which a young man carries off a young woman and does something scandalous to her. Unlike her mother's talk, the book lacked all details. But it made up for the lack of details with its breathless tone and florid language that spoke of dark passion and hot love and fevered kisses. Lottie had told Nadya to hide the book from her mother, and so she did. She read it down by the river. When she read the book, she found herself curling up her legs and rocking to and fro. Something was happening. Her nipples grew tight and she felt a new warmth between her legs. She did not understand why that should be.

When her father stripped for the Change, she had seen his cock and balls, hanging softly between his legs. She thought little of that, even after reading Lottie's book. She thought all the fuss about nakedness and sin and love was nonsense; it had nothing to do with her. And so the feeling that came when Rufus' hand touched hers took her by surprise. The feeling in her stomach reminded her of reading Lottie's book by the river. Something was happening.

"You're surprised to see me," Rufus said.

"That's so."

"I'd hoped you'd be glad."

She said nothing, concentrating on the feel of the cool dirt beneath her bare feet. Like walking on the fence. She did not want to fall.

"Aren't you glad?" he asked.

"I'm glad," she said. Her voice was soft and she didn't sound sure.

They had reached the spring. A small wooden shelter covered the pool and two log steps led down to the water's edge. "I'd best get the water," she said. "My feet are bare, and you don't want to get your boots wet." She took the bucket from him and went down to the bottom step, where the water lapped at her feet. She stooped to fill the bucket, holding her skirt up out of the way.

"You look beautiful," he said, gazing down at her.

She straightened up, holding the bucket, and frowned at him. "You are a very strange man."

"Why do you say that?"

She stood by the cool water, studying his face. "Because you say I'm beautiful."

"You are."

She shook her head ever so slightly. Her mother was beautiful, Nadya knew that. But Nadya had studied her own face in the looking glass. It was a wide face, like her father's, and her hair was too wild to tame with braids and hairpins. She knew that she was not beautiful.

"You were the prettiest girl at the wedding."

"The best shot," she corrected.

"That too."

She shook her head and climbed the steps. He stood on the path, blocking her way.

Lottie and other girls talked about young men and dresses and dances and maybe getting married. Nadya had listened to the girls talk, but she had always known she was not like those girls.

When she reached the top step, she turned to tell him that he should go and talk to Lottie or one of the others, and leave her alone. Before she could speak, he kissed her. The kiss was awkward at first—lips bumping against lips. But she did not pull away, and he kissed her again, this time lifting his hand to touch her cheek. His lips were soft. His hand moved from her cheek to stroke her neck. The touch, more than the kiss, made her catch her breath.

He kissed her again, and she could feel the warmth of him through the thin calico of her dress. She could feel a trembling deep inside herself, so deep that the vibration did not reach the surface. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek, where she could feel the stubble of a beard, clean-shaven that morning. His smell changed, just as it had when they danced together at the wedding. She knew the smell of sex: a warm muskiness that clung to her mother on certain mornings. She could smell the muskiness in the air. His hand, moving downward, touched her breast, stroking gently over the fabric and coming to rest at her waist.

She stepped back. "Mama will wonder where we have been. We'd best go back."

He grinned at her, showing white teeth.

They had tea, and Nadya listened to her mother and Rufus talk about the weather, the plowing, his father's aching stomach, his family and their journey westward. Rufus' scent overpowered the familiar smell of the herbs that hung from the pegs in the wall. Rufus talked with her mother, but every now and again, Nadya caught him glancing in her direction.

When he left, Nadya waved goodbye and watched him go.

Her mother frowned at her. "You've taken a fancy to this young man, haven't you? Look at me, *chérie*. Let me see your face." Nadya looked up and her mother nodded.

"He taught me to waltz at the wedding," Nadya said. She held out her arms and took a few steps, whirling as she stepped. "He put his arm around me and we danced together."

"Yes," her mother said. "What do you think he wants?"

Nadya dropped her hands. Thinking about Rufus made her cheeks grow hot. "To kiss me, I reckon."

"To kiss you, to hug you, to run his hands over your body, to lie with you." Her mother's tone was matter-of-fact. "I have told you how it is between men and women." She stood in front of Nadya and took her daughter's hands. "And you want him to do that."

"I don't know," Nadya said. "I want. . . ." She shook her head, thinking about the warmth of Rufus' body, so close to hers. "I don't know what I want."

"There is nothing wrong with wanting a man," Nadya's mother said. "In our family, the blood has always run hot." She hesitated, studying Nadya's face. "But this man—he is not good for you. This man is dangerous."

Nadya pulled her hands away from her mother's. "What do you mean?"

"Remember the cards? A young man, fair-haired, reckless. He brings misfortune to you and to us. Remember."

"Not Rufus," Nadya said. "He won't bring misfortune."

"Listen to me, Nadya," her mother said. "You must listen. Do not go with this man."

Nadya hung her head, looking down at the porch. "I am listening," she said sullenly.

"Do you understand?"

"I understand." Nadya understood, but she did not agree.

"That's good. Now here is Papa, coming in from the fields. Put aside your work and let us prepare for the Change."

Preparing for the Change was not so different from their regular evening chores. They simply began the work early, so that they would be ready when the sun set. Nadya's father milked the cow and fed the mule; Nadya called the hogs and chased the chickens into their coop for the night. Nadya's mother prepared a simple meal of hoecake and ham; she thought it best to change with a little food in the belly—not too much, and not too little. She put the remaining food out of reach of any varmints that might come to the unoccupied cabin and carefully banked the fire so that she could easily revive it when they returned, weary and cold from the night in the forest.

When the sun dipped near the horizon, Nadya stepped out on the front porch. Their cabin faced east and the porch was already in shadow. Nadya pulled off her dress, hung it from a peg beside the cabin door, and waited for her parents.

She could hear her parents murmuring inside the cabin, but the words were already starting to sound like meaningless babble. She could feel the moon rising, a tugging that she felt in her belly and her crotch.

Nadya rubbed her hands over the goose bumps on her naked arms and shivered. Her father said something and mother laughed. She heard the rustling of clothing.

"The sun is setting," Nadya said, and she heard her mother's hand on the door latch.

"We are here," her mother said. Her hair was loose, falling in dark waves down her back.

The Change came.

It began with warmth, as if the moonlight on her skin carried the heat of the tropical sun. But the warmth came from within her, not from outside. She could feel her heart beating and her blood surging through her body, pounding in her veins and arteries. The moon pulled on her blood as it pulled on the ocean: she was caught in a tide, a riptide that she was powerless to resist. Her body burned with the heat and she breathed faster. There was something she wanted, something she needed—she knew that, though she could not describe what that something was.

She could not tell if the feeling was pleasure or pain. These words did not apply. With each Change, she felt a new intensity (surely it could not have felt like this on the last full moon). She felt like she might be dying or she might, at last, be coming to life. In that moment, the two seemed much the same. And maybe she wanted to stop, she wanted to call out "No, no, no, this is too much, I can't. . . , I won't. . . ." But what it was that she couldn't or wouldn't do was lost in clouds and darkness, because no words came. Words were going away, rushing away, a babble that no longer had meaning or value. She was poised on the brink, on the knife's edge, at the precipice of the mountain, at the edge of the cliff.

And when the Change came at last, it came with an inexorable rush. Her body made its decision and the part of her that thought and talked and planned and believed that it controlled so much, that part was carried along, like a straw in the river's current. There was no stopping the river, no turning back.

That was what the Change was like. And when it was over, she stood on four legs instead of two; her body was covered with fur; her ears caught the rustling of a mouse under the porch. But all that was not important. What was important was the Change itself, the moment of shifting, the malleability of the flesh, the decision of the body.

A family of wolves stood on the porch, gazing out at the forest. The wolf that had been Nadya sniffed the breeze, then the handle of the bucket by the cabin door. The scent that clung to the handle made the young wolf whimper low in her throat. She explored the farmyard, stopping to sniff deeply by the split rail fence where Rufus had tied his horse.

The male wolf trotted to the edge of the forest, where he lifted his head and sampled the air. He headed along a deer trail, not looking back to see if the others followed. The older female started after the male, then looked back at the young female and made an encouraging sound in her throat. The young wolf ignored the older female and continued sniffing at the grass by the fence. The older female whimpered again, but the younger wolf set off on her own path, following the scent in the grass. The wolf that was Nadya was old enough to wander away from the pack if she would, and the female let her go, following her mate and letting her daughter find her own way.

Nadya came back to her human form on the porch of the farmhouse. The taste of blood was in her mouth. She rubbed her hand across her face, and looked at it. Flecks of dark brown dotted the skin. Dried blood. She could hear her mother in the cabin, breaking kindling to add to the fire.

Nadya blinked in the morning light, trying to remember the night. Memories of the Change faded like dreams; memories of the Change did not fit well in the human brain. The colors were wrong; the smells didn't match the human memory of smells. At best, she could recapture only fragments of the night.

She remembered sheep, bleating sheep that ran from her. She could not help but chase the clumsy creatures, so fat and foolish and warm. She cut a fat ewe from the herd and chased it along a fence, tearing at its haunches and tasting its blood. It cried out, a silly bleating that made her heart beat faster, and she tore at it again. Dark streaks of blood colored the pale fleece, and still the ewe ran. She tore at its legs until it stumbled and then she was on it, bowling it over and ripping at its belly. The blood was warm on her face, splashing over her body, filling her nose with its dark scent.

She remembered a sound—the sharp crack of gunfire, the acrid scent of gunpowder, cutting through the alluring aroma of blood. She heard

shouting and more gunfire. She ran then, her fear overcoming her taste for the hunt.

Nadya sat on the porch, the taste of blood still on her lips. Her father stood in the doorway to the cabin. “Little one,” he said to her. “Where did you go last night? You left us.” His tone was reproachful.

Nadya hung her head. “I guess . . . I reckon I must have followed Rufus home.”

Her father wet his lips, looking worried. “I smell blood. That’s not good. Not good at all.”

Her mother came from the cabin, carrying a basin of water, warmed on the fire. She stood on the porch, watching as Nadya splashed the warm water on her face and arms. She put her arm around Nadya’s father. “She’s home safe, Dmitri. That’s what’s important.”

He shook his head. “Did they fire at you?” he asked her.

“I think so.” Nadya kept her eyes on the water. The blood had colored it pale pink.

“They will come for us with guns,” he said. “They will hunt us through the forest with dogs and guns.”

“No, Dmitri,” her mother said. “Don’t be so excited. It will be all right.”

Nadya’s father turned away and went back into the cabin. Nadya’s mother stroked her hair. “It will be all right, *chérie*. I think it will be all right.” But the smell of her father’s fear lingered in the air.

Just two weeks later, Mrs. Evans had a quilting bee to make a new quilt for Lottie’s older sister, who was engaged to Judd Collins. Nadya’s mother woke that morning feeling poorly, and so Nadya went alone, riding the mule the five miles to town.

Lottie greeted Nadya in the yard. “Nadya,” she called. “I’m so glad you’re here. They’ve been teasing me so.” She tucked her hand companionably into the crook of Nadya’s arm. “They’ve been teasing me about when I’ll be getting married.”

Lottie had grown up to become a rosy-cheeked young woman with blonde hair that invariably escaped her ribbons and pins. Wisps of hair curled at the nape of her neck. The youngest of three sisters, she came in for more than her share of teasing.

“Didn’t your mother come?” she asked Nadya.

“She’s feeling poorly,” Nadya said. “I came by myself.”

“You’re so brave,” Lottie said. “I wouldn’t want to come so far by myself.”

Nadya shrugged.

“There’ll be a dance at Mary Sue’s wedding,” Lottie said. Lottie lowered her voice. “I asked Mary Sue to make sure Silas Whitman was coming. I danced with him at Zillah’s wedding. And Mary Sue told Mama and now they’re all teasing me. You won’t tease me, will you?”

Nadya shook her head. She never had to say much around Lottie; Lottie did the talking for both of them.

“Is there anyone you’re sweet on, Nadya?”

"Rufus Jones came visiting a few days back," Nadya admitted softly.

"He came visiting?" Lottie's eyes widened with excitement. "Oh, Nadya, he didn't."

Nadya nodded. "He sure did."

Lottie wet her lips. "Mrs. Jones is here, helping with the quilting." She made a face. "She doesn't approve of dancing at weddings. I don't think she likes anyone to have any fun."

"Nadya!" Mrs. Evans called from the doorway. "How nice to see you. Isn't your mother with you?"

"My mama was feeling poorly," Nadya said softly. "She told me to give you her love."

"You came all this way alone?" Mrs. Evans shook her head and clicked her tongue. "My goodness—this is no time for a girl to be gallivanting about alone. Now you come on in and sit down here."

The Evanses had a fine house, with four separate rooms and a puncheon floor in the parlor. Mrs. Evans had a dozen store-bought chairs and a mantelpiece clock. On the wall of the parlor there was a looking glass and a hair wreath that Mrs. Evans had woven from the tresses of departed relations: from each of her three children who had died young, from her own mother and father. The puncheon floor was covered with a real machine-woven carpet, not a rag rug.

The quilt frame stretched the width of the parlor, leaving just enough space at the sides for women to sit beside it. The room was already crowded: Mrs. Shaw and her daughter Zillah sat on one side of the quilt, Mrs. Whitman and her daughter sat on the other. Mrs. Jones sat at the far end of the quilt frame, enthroned in one of Mrs. Evans's best chairs. Mary Sue sat beside her. Lottie sat on a stool at one corner and Nadya sat beside her and Mrs. Evans.

The quilt, an intricate design of bright calico diamonds, was stretched on the frame. Nadya threaded a needle and began stitching the brightly colored patchwork to the padded lining.

"Nadya rode from her house alone," Mrs. Evans announced to the others.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Whitman murmured. "Hadn't you heard about the wolves?" The Whitmans had moved to Missouri from Connecticut just a year before, and Mrs. Whitman was still very nervous about wild animals and Indians.

Nadya shook her head. "What about wolves?"

Mrs. Whitman clapped her hands. "Wolves attacked the Jones' farm! Mrs. Jones, you must tell the child."

Mrs. Jones looked up from her stitching and smiled grimly. "I woke in the night to the sound of our sheep, bleating in terror. A pack of wolves had attacked our flock. Ravening beasts from the depths of the forest dragging down the innocent lambs. Rufus chased them away with a shot, but not before the wolves had killed our fattest ewe." She shook her head. "The poor defenseless creature never had a chance."

Nadya ducked her head and kept her eyes on her stitching.

"Oh, you must have been so frightened," Mrs. Whitman said. "When I hear wolves howling, the sound sends chills up my spine. It's as if the Devil himself was out there, crying for blood."

"I put my faith in the Lord," Mrs. Jones said staunchly. "The Devil has no power over a true Christian."

Nadya neatly stitched around a red calico diamond. It seemed to her that rifles would do a better job of driving a wolf away than Mrs. Jones's prayers, but she did not think it would be wise to mention that.

"So you can see that this is no time for you to be wandering about by yourself," Mrs. Evans said to Nadya. "I'll have one of the boys escort you home."

"I heard that there was a preacher down river in White's Landing a few days back," Mrs. Shaw said, changing the subject. "Reverend William Cooper is his name. They say he can exhort the bark off a tree. He'll be here next Sunday."

The last great wave of camp meetings had ended back in the 1820s, but even in the 1840s, the Methodists had their circuit riders, preachers on horseback who traveled from one frontier settlement to the next, calling the wrath of God on sinners, warning of the coming Judgment Day, and saving souls where they could. A preacher with the power of exhortation could call the Spirit of the Lord upon the Assembly, causing men and women to jerk wildly to and fro, to fall on all fours and bark like dogs, to weep and cry and shout in languages that no American could understand.

The women talked for a time about the preacher.

"I don't know if Mr. Shaw will come to hear a preacher," Mrs. Shaw murmured. The last preacher to visit the community had been a Baptist, traveling by flatboat. He held a Sunday service by the riverside and dunked half a dozen farmers. Mr. Shaw's dunking had given him a fierce case of the grippe.

Mrs. Jones straightened her back, looking even more formidable. "It's our Christian duty to attend this meeting," she said. "I will bring all my boys."

The mention of Mrs. Jones's boys brought the conversation back to Mary Sue's marriage. As they worked, the older women talked about the dress Mary Sue would wear and about the latest fashions in *Godey's Ladies Book*. Mary Sue talked about all the people who would be coming to the wedding and the dance.

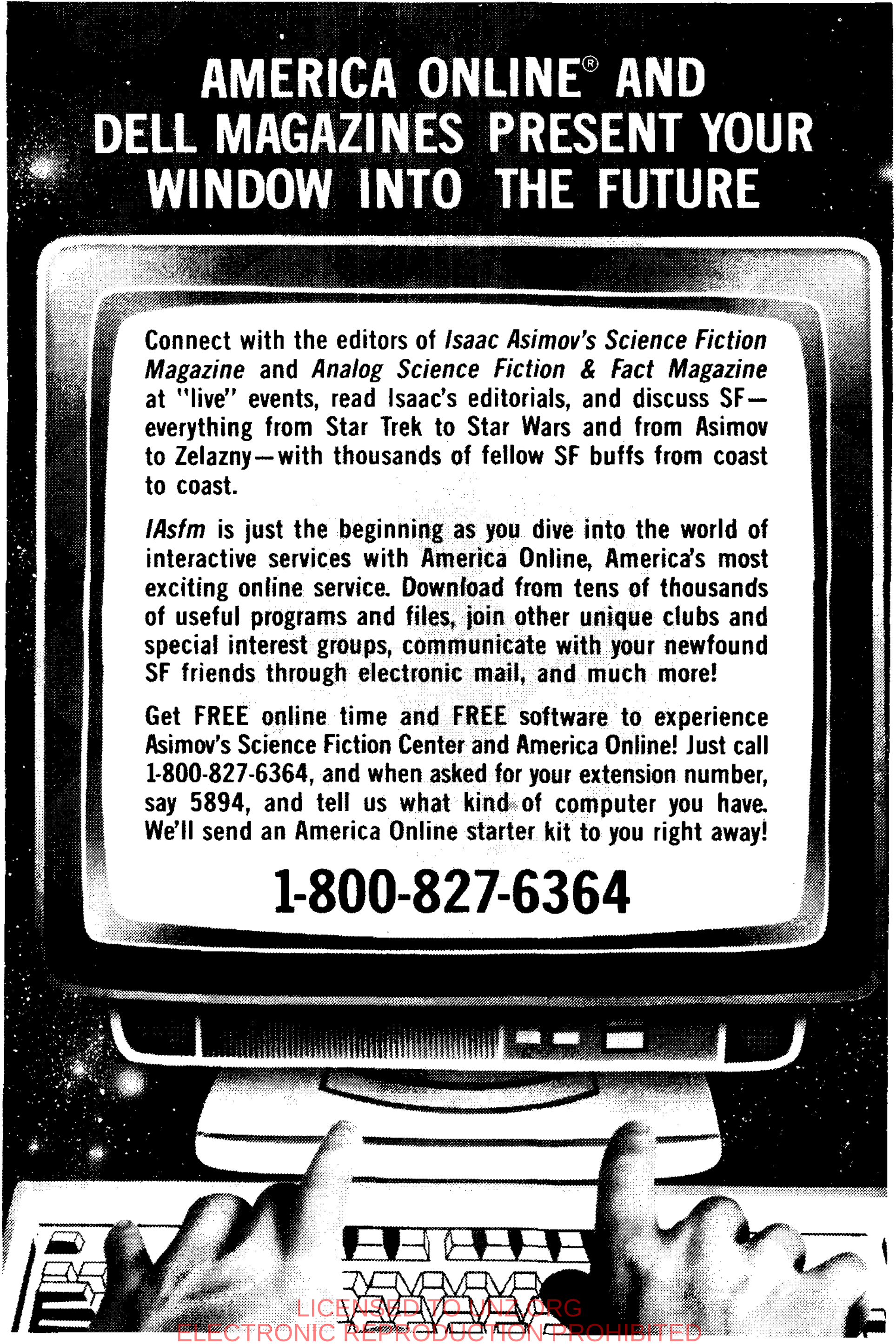
They chatted amiably until teatime. After eating, they returned to their work.

"Take smaller stitches, Lottie," Mrs. Evans admonished her daughter. "Look at Nadya's stitches. See how small and tight they are."

Nadya glanced up at her friend with a sympathetic expression. Her own hands were tired from the careful work.

"Maybe Lottie and Nadya should fetch some water for another pot of tea," Mrs. Shaw suggested kindly. "I'll finish up that corner."

Lottie and Nadya wasted no time hurrying out of the house. They took



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two buckets from beside the door and strolled down to the pump. "So now that you know about the wolves, aren't you scared about riding around alone?" Lottie asked.

"Nope," Nadya said. "A wolf ain't going to bother with me."

Lottie shook her head. "You'd best be careful, Nadya. One of my brothers will ride home with you."

Nadya frowned. "What's your brother going to do that I couldn't do myself?"

"Well, he'd shoot any wolf that came after you."

"So? I'm a better shot than any of your brothers. I could shoot a wolf myself, if it came to that."

Lottie shook her head at Nadya's audacity. "I'd be so scared."

Nadya shrugged. "I've shot deer. I've shot bear. I can take care of myself."

"I guess so," Lottie said doubtfully. Then she brightened, changing the subject. "Do you reckon that Rufus will come to fetch his mother?"

Nadya shrugged. "I reckon so." She had wondered that herself. The thought of Rufus alarmed her more than all the talk of the wolves. She looked down at the path.

"When he came visiting, what happened?" Lottie asked.

"He talked to my mama for a while about herbs for Mr. Jones. And he came with me to the spring to fetch water."

Lottie stopped and stared at Nadya. "Nadya, you're blushing. I've never seen you blush before."

Nadya scuffed her bare foot in the dust.

"What happened? Did he hold your hand? Did he kiss you?"

Nadya nodded. "He held my hand. And then he kissed me."

"Oh, Nadya. Was it like in the book? Did you swoon in his arms?"

Nadya remembered the moment by the spring. "It's more like standing on top of the barn roof, wondering if you're going to fall."

"I've never done that," Lottie said.

"Or standing on the bluff over the river, looking at the current below. That current could sweep you away and you'd never get back again." Nadya shook her head. "Don't know that I like it."

"It's so exciting, Nadya. I hope that Silas Whitman comes visiting me. What did you say to him?"

"I hardly talked at all," Nadya confessed. "I didn't know what to say."

"That's all right," Lottie said. "My sister Mary Sue says that you don't have to talk much. I asked her, and she said that all you have to do when you're sitting with a man is to tell him how wonderful he is, and that's enough. Like this." They had reached the pump. Lottie set down her bucket and took Nadya's hand in hers. "Oh, Rufus—I feel so safe with you here. You're so strong and brave."

Nadya frowned at her. "That's silly, Lottie. He doesn't make me feel safe."

"But you could say he did, couldn't you?" Lottie held the bucket while

Nadya pumped the water. "Mary Sue says that men like to hear things like that."

Lottie set down her bucket and held Nadya's under the rush of water. Nadya continued pumping, considering what Lottie had said. She had nothing against lying, but this seemed like a foolish thing to lie about. "I don't know why he would make me feel safe," Nadya said. "I can shoot as well as he can. Seems like he ought to tell me that I make him feel safe."

"Oh, Nadya, don't you go around saying things like that. He tells you that you're pretty and you tell him that he's strong. That's what Mary Sue says," Lottie spoke with the superior wisdom of a girl who had older sisters.

"My mama says he's dangerous," Nadya said hesitantly.

"How exciting!" Lottie danced in a little circle. "I don't see how you can be so calm about it. If it was me, I'd be beside myself."

"We'd best get back with the water," Nadya said.

As they walked back toward the house, Lottie did most of the talking. "I can help you fix your hair for Mary Sue's wedding. We can put it up like the picture I saw in *Godey's Ladies Book*. You'll look so fine. But you have to promise that you won't get into a shooting match or anything like that."

Nadya walked at Lottie's side. Her friend's excitement made her uneasy. She was not sure how she felt about Rufus, but Lottie seemed certain that she should be happy.

They returned to the cabin and built up the fire to boil water for tea. The quilt was almost done—all that remained was the edging, and Zillah and Mary Sue and Mrs. Evans would manage that.

Lottie had just made a pot of tea when the dogs began barking outside. "Hello!" A man's voice called from the farmyard. "Hello, ladies!"

Mr. Whitman had come to escort Mrs. Whitman and her daughters home. He had a cup of tea with the women, and while they were drinking it, Mr. Evans and his sons returned from fishing, carrying a string of catfish. Then Rufus Jones and his brother Moses appeared in the doorway. Rufus took off his hat and smiled at all the women. It seemed to Nadya that his eyes lingered on her.

Mrs. Evans insisted that Nadya accompany Mrs. Jones and her sons to the fork in the trail that led to the Rybak house. Then Rufus would escort Nadya to her door. "We just can't be too careful," Mrs. Evans said.

Nadya protested, but Mrs. Jones hushed her with a wave of a hand. "Of course you will come with us. I'll have no more said about it."

Nadya rode with Mrs. Jones in the farm wagon for the first few miles. Her mule was tied on behind the wagon. As they bumped over the rough trail, Mrs. Jones lectured Nadya on the dangers of wandering through the forest alone. Nadya remained silent, watching Rufus's back. He sat on the driver's seat, eyes on the trail ahead.

At the fork in the road, Moses took the reins. Rufus swung down from the driver's seat and untied Nadya's mule from the back of the wagon.

Nadya jumped down from the wagon before he could help her, not wanting to touch his hand.

"You hurry home, Rufus," Mrs. Jones said to her son.

Rufus touched his hat to his mother and waved as the horse pulled the wagon down the main trail.

"It's a pleasure to have your company again so soon," Rufus said. The wagon reached a bend in the trail and Rufus waved to his mother as the trail took her out of sight. Then he reached out and took Nadya's hand. "I had hoped I might see you today."

"I was glad to see you too," Nadya said. She wasn't certain of the truth of her words until after she said them. He squeezed her hand.

"Come on," he said, and they started in the direction of the Rybak farm.

The trail followed the river, more or less. Sometimes, it ran alongside the water, and sometimes it snaked between the trees, avoiding the brambles and thickets at the river's edge.

Nadya walked silently at his side. It was strange, having his hand in hers. Overhead, squirrels chattered and barked at them.

"Here—stop a bit," he said. He let go of her hand and stepped to where a dogwood tree was blooming. He picked a pale blossom and returned to her side. "These would look nice in your hair," he said, and reached up to tuck the flower behind her ear. He stepped back and looked at her. "It suits you," he said. "You look very pretty."

She returned his stare, still silent.

"You're such a quiet one," he said. "Don't you like flowers?"

"I like flowers."

He hesitated. "I know a place not far from here, down by the river, where there's a beautiful patch of flowers. Would you like to see it?"

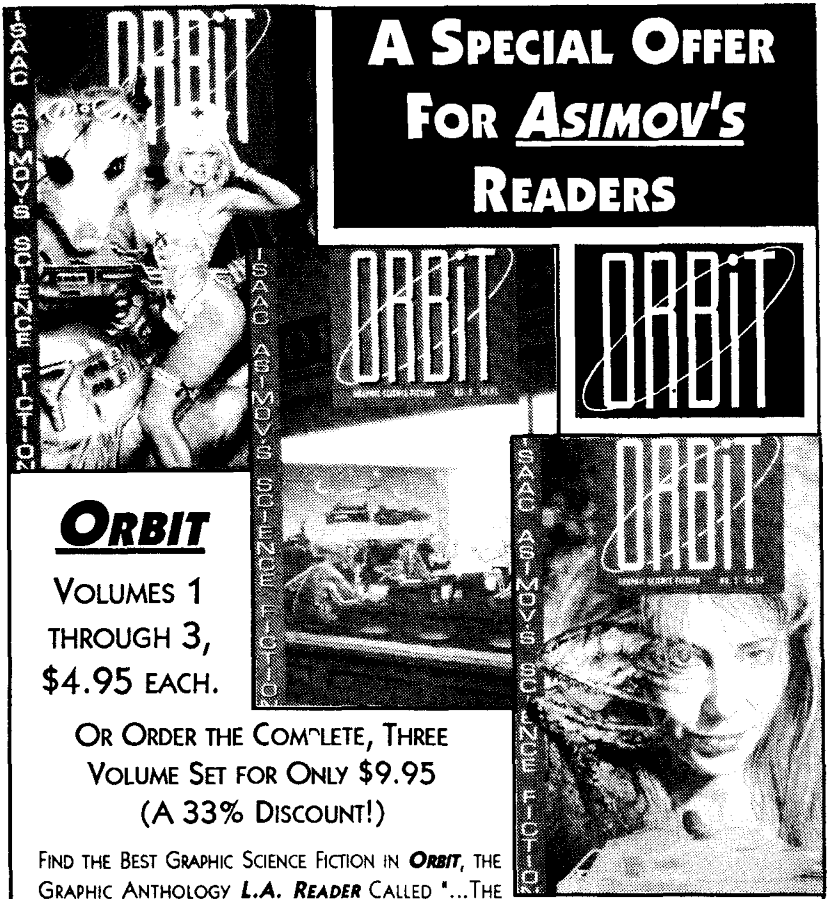
His scent had changed—she could smell the muskiness of sex. "All right," she said. "I'd like to."

He took her hand again, holding it tighter than before, and led her off the main trail, along a deer path that led through the trees and downward toward the river. Partway down, out of sight of the trail, he tied the mule to a tree.

The path led to a secluded hollow where the grass was already thick and green. A redbud tree bloomed on the river bank, its flowers brilliant against the spring greenery. He held her hand and led her to where the sheltering branch of a willow blocked the view of the river. The tree formed a great room, carpeted with ferns and perfumed with the fragrance of the flowers and plants.

"I found this when I was hunting," he said. "It's a beautiful place, isn't it?" He looked down at her and wet his lips. "I hoped you would come here with me." Then he reached out and put his arms around her.

She could feel the warmth of his skin through her dress; she could smell his sweat—a complex musky smell mingled with the aroma of tobacco. She tilted her head to look up into his face and he kissed her as he had at the spring.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She sensed the thing that waited beneath the surface, like the currents that boiled in the river. There was a mystery here, something that went beyond the farm animals mating in the barnyard. She had listened to the cats yowling at night. The female in heat made a low moaning sound that contained both pleading and threat. She understood that sound now.

"Here," he said, releasing her. "Let's sit in the grass. That would be fine." He led her to a place where the grass was soft. She sat there, her bare feet pulled up under her dress and her arms wrapped around her knees. He sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I should have known you would come here with me," he said then. "You aren't like the other girls."

She nodded. She knew that was true—the other girls didn't hunt and shoot—but she wondered what that had to do with sitting beside him by the river. He kissed her lightly. His arm dropped from her shoulder to her waist. His other hand caressed her thigh through the fabric of her dress and her petticoat. He lifted his eyes to her face. "I love you, Nadya." His hand continued to stroke her thigh.

"My mama says that you're dangerous," she said.

"Your mama doesn't like you playing with the boys. But I think you like me." He kissed her again. "Don't you believe that I love you, Nadya?"

She ignored the question. "Your mother told me about the wolves that killed your sheep the other night."

"Ah, sweet Nadya—are you afraid of wolves?" He tightened the arm that encircled her shoulders. "I'll keep you safe. I'll kill any wolf that comes near us."

"No!" she said, starting to pull away. "You mustn't."

"What is it, Nadya?" He reached out and held her tighter. "What is it?"

"You mustn't kill wolves," she said. "You've got to promise me that."

He laughed. "Does it worry you that I hunt for wolves? Well then, I won't go hunting for wolves if that makes you unhappy." His face relaxed and his hand resumed its movement on her thigh. "Now don't you believe that I love you, Nadya?"

Her body believed him. When he kissed her, she responded. She felt his hand on her thigh, lifting her dress so that he could stroke the bare skin. He kept kissing her, giving her no chance to answer his question, but she did not mind that. There was a warmth in her body, a kind of tingling that felt like the coming of the Change, only different. His body pressed against hers, pushing her back on the grass. One of his hands fumbled at the buttons of her dress; the other slid higher between her thighs. She was not wearing any underwear, and his hand explored the warmth between her legs. She made a sound—almost a growl like the cats in the barn—and he pressed his fingers harder against her.

"Oh, Nadya, I can't stop myself." He was on top of her now, fumbling with the buttons of his trousers. His hand was fumbling with the buttons on the front of her dress. The tingling was growing greater, spreading through her body. He moaned, pressing against her.

Rufus pushed his leg between her thighs, spreading her legs apart. The movement of his leg made her squirm as the tingling grew stronger. It was frightening, this feeling, but she welcomed it at the same time. She wanted something that she could not name.

Abruptly, he shoved himself between her thighs and thrust into her. She cried out, startled. There was a sensation of tearing and wetness and a sudden pain that mingled with the warmth and tingling. He thrust again and then came quickly, collapsing against her with a moan. She moved her hips against him, trying to shift him so that the tingling sensations would return, but he did not move, lying atop her like a dead man. "Oh," he moaned, "Oh, Nadya."

He rolled off her and lay in the grass, staring up at the sky. His penis glistened in the late afternoon sunlight. Streaked with semen and blood, it had started to droop. She reached between her own legs, and her fingers came away touched with blood. But even so, there was still pleasure in her own touch.

He looked over at her, propping himself up on one elbow. The top of her dress gaped open and her nipples were crinkled and brown in the sun. Her skirt was bunched around her waist. He reached over and tugged on her dress, pulling the fabric so that it covered her breasts. "You'd best cover yourself," he said.

"Why?"

He shook his head as if she should not have asked, and frowned. As she watched, he started to button his trousers.

She put her hand on his to stop him. "No," she said. Her dress gaped when she moved, exposing her breasts once again. She slipped her hand beneath his and into his trousers. He made a sound, the beginning of a protest, but it died in his throat. His cock was warm in her hand; the skin so soft and smooth. She slid her hand lower, cupping his balls and feeling his rough pubic hair against her fingers. One hand was on his cock, the other was between her own legs, teasing the slippery folds, pressing into her body.

Rufus moaned and his eyes half-closed. He put one hand on her breast and started to move toward her, as if to roll on top of her again.

"No," she said. "Not that way." She pushed him so that he lay flat on his back. Before he could move again, she threw a leg over his and straddled him. His cock was erect now, and she rubbed it against herself, directing its movement with her hand.

With her free hand, she lifted Rufus' hand to her breast, relishing the feel of his rough skin against her nipple. His eyes were open now; he looked surprised, a little confused. She rubbed herself up and down, then lifted herself and slipped his cock inside her. With her hand, she continued to rub the hard knot of flesh in the midst of the folds where the tingling seemed to center. She growled, a sound that rumbled from her throat without her thought or will. She squeezed her eyes closed, shutting out the brightness of the sunlight that filtered through the willow leaves. She bent so that her breasts rubbed against his chest and she nipped at his shoulder, rocking back and forth faster now, still faster.

She arched her back, and the pleasure was so intense it was nearly pain. She felt him inside her, squeezed by the spasms of her muscles. A great wave pulsed within her, beginning between her legs and spreading outward. Pleasure, urgency, darkness, and warmth—a confusion of sensations that left her gasping and limp.

"Ah," she said. "Ah, Rufus." She opened her eyes then, and looked down at him.

His eyes were open and he was watching her. He wasn't smiling; she could not read his expression. His cock was growing soft within her, so she slipped off him and lay beside him in the grass, where she could watch his face. He looked up at the sky.

"What are you thinking?" she asked him.

He kept looking at the sky. "You're not like the other girls."

She smiled. "That's so. You already told me that."

"It's not proper. You shouldn't. . . ." He hesitated. "You oughtn't act like that."

"Like what?"

He shook his head and frowned at her. "Girls don't act like that. You're very bold."

She continued to smile. "And so are you."

He reached out and tugged her dress down so that it covered her. "We'd best be getting home."

She watched him sit up and hurriedly button his trousers and tuck his shirt. He did not look at her again. She made no move to dress herself, just studied him, trying to understand his expression. He smelled of sex and anger and fear. She did not understand the anger or the fear. What had frightened him?

He glanced down at her. "Button yourself," he said roughly. "Cover yourself and act decent."

She sat up then, pulling her skirt down to cover her legs and slowly buttoning her dress.

"Come along," he said, and led the way back up to where the mule was tied. He did not take her hand. He accompanied her home, but did not linger to have tea or talk with her parents, leaving her at the doorstep and hurrying away into the forest as if he were suddenly afraid of her.

The next Sunday morning, Nadya and her family went to town. The mule had thrown a shoe and her father was taking it to the blacksmith.

The bench in front of the general store was crowded with loafing men: trappers, come to town to trade and drink; a rough looking crew from the barge that was tied at the crossing; a few farmers. Nadya saw Mr. Jones among them but looked for Rufus in vain. A green jug was passing from hand to hand, and Nadya could smell the sharp scent of chewing tobacco.

Nadya's father pulled the farm wagon to the side of the dirt street. He

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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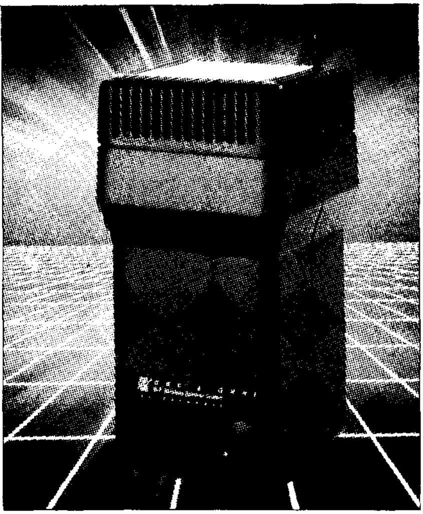

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stopped by the bench to chat with the men, while Nadya and her mother went into the store.

Mr. Evans was counting out nutmegs and cinnamon sticks for Mrs. Walker, and the spices perfumed the air. Mrs. Evans was helping Mrs. Jones, who had just purchased a length of plain red calico for new shirts for her sons. "Those boys are almighty rough on clothes," she was saying to Mrs. Evans. "I pity the girl that marries Rufus. She'll be sewing her fingers to the bone just to keep him in shirts."

Mrs. Evans looked up and greeted Nadya and her mother. "Morning, Mrs. Rybak, Miss Nadya. How are you today?"

Mrs. Jones studied the pair of them. "Morning, Mrs. Rybak," Mrs. Jones said. "How nice to see you again. Did Nadya tell you that the tea you sent was a great help to Mr. Jones?"

"I'm pleased to hear it, Mrs. Jones." Nadya watched in silence. She knew that her mother did not care for Mrs. Jones, but she smiled as if Mrs. Jones were a friend. "It is really the simplest thing to make. If you like, I can show you the herbs that I use."

"Mr. Jones won't be needing the remedy again. He told me that very morning that he had sworn off the demon whiskey and would drink only healthful beverages from that day on."

Nadya wondered at that. She was certain that Mr. Jones had been among the loiterers on the porch. In her experience, a jug being passed on the porch of a store rarely contained healthful beverages. But she held her tongue and listened while her mother murmured polite congratulations.

"I do hope that you and your family will be attending the services by the river this afternoon," Mrs. Jones said. "Reverend William Cooper, a preacher of fine repute, has come to speak to us of the ways of sin. My family will be there."

"What denomination is the preacher?" Nadya's mother asked. Nadya knew this was simply politeness. If the preacher were a Baptist, Nadya's mother would claim to be strictly Methodist. If he were a Methodist, she might declare herself a Baptist. One way or the other, she would politely evade the preaching.

"He is a man of God," Mrs. Jones declared. "I don't know more than that. But that is all I need to know. All Christians are brothers under the skin."

Nadya's mother nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you so much for telling us about it. Perhaps we will see you there."

Mrs. Jones took the calico that Mrs. Evans had folded neatly. "Now I must be going, to tell others that we are blessed with a preacher this Sunday. Perhaps some of those who prefer dancing to praying will come and see the evil of their ways. I will see you by the river." She left the store without looking back.

Nadya's mother and Mrs. Evans exchanged glances. "She's enough to give being a Christian a bad name," Mrs. Evans murmured, and Nadya's mother laughed.

"I hear that she scolded Mrs. Shaw for allowing dancing and drinking at the wedding," Nadya's mother said softly.

"I hear the same. But Mr. Jones and his sons were drinking and dancing with the rest of them."

Nadya's mother smiled and shrugged. "Ah, but you heard what Mrs. Jones said. Mr. Jones has declared he will only drink healthful beverages."

Mrs. Evans laughed. "Ah, but whiskey can be medicinal, and surely that's a healthful thing."

"And dancing is fine exercise, and that is needed for health as well," Nadya's mother replied.

"Of course," Mrs. Evans said. "I should have thought of that. And all Mr. Jones's gasconading about what fine shots his boys are, that's exercise for the lungs."

The women laughed softly.

"And so what is it that brings you to town?" Mrs. Evans asked.

"Nadya thought she'd sew a new dress to wear to Mary Sue's wedding, so we have come for calico."

"A new dress?" Mrs. Evans smiled at Nadya. "Miss Nadya, you're not buying black powder and lead shot? You're becoming a lady."

Nadya blushed and looked down at her feet.

"Here now, Nadya, I have some lovely cloth to choose from." Mrs. Evans pulled bolt after bolt from the shelves, placing them on the table for Nadya's examination. Nadya favored a length of fine dark blue cloth, patterned with tiny red roses.

"The color complements your complexion," Mrs. Evans said. "And it won't show the dirt."

Nadya's mother fingered the cloth, testing the weave. "It seems quite sturdy," she said.

"Oh, it will wear well, I'm sure of that."

While Mrs. Evans was cutting and folding the cloth, Lottie came into the store from the back. The mothers remained in the store, chatting about remedies and recipes, but Nadya and Lottie escaped to the outside.

Nadya's father was sitting on the porch. The two young women lingered for a moment, to see if the men were talking about anything interesting. Mr. Walker was holding a penny paper that had just come in from Philadelphia. "It's a brand new party for new times," he was saying. "Call themselves the Native Americans. They have no use for Papists, and I'll go along with that. Take those Irishmen, fresh off the boat. You can scarcely understand a word that comes out of their mouths." He slapped the paper against his thigh. "Keep America for Americans. That's what I say."

"Keep America for the Americans," Nadya's father said slowly, repeating the words as if he had not heard them right. His Polish accent grew thicker, as it always did when he was upset. "Twenty years, I have been in this country. I would guess that I am an American. But these people would say I ain't." Mr. Walker started to interrupt, but Nadya's father kept going. "America is for all types of men from all different countries. That's what makes this country strong."

"Next thing you know, you'll be saying we should set free the slaves," Mr. Jones said.

"Come on," Lottie whispered to Nadya. "They're just talking politics. Let's go." They walked down the dusty street, and Lottie companionably linked her arm in Nadya's.

"Do you want to go down to the river?" Lottie asked. "Mrs. Jones said there'd be a preacher talking about God."

"I don't know," Nadya said, looking doubtful. "I'd better ask my mama."

"Oh, come on. Let's just go. Your mama will be glad you are hearing the word of God. Besides, maybe Rufus and Silas will be there."

"All right," Nadya said. "I'll go."

Arm in arm, they strolled to the river crossing. As they grew closer, they could make out muddled singing. The tune was familiar, a popular song modified to match a holier set of words.

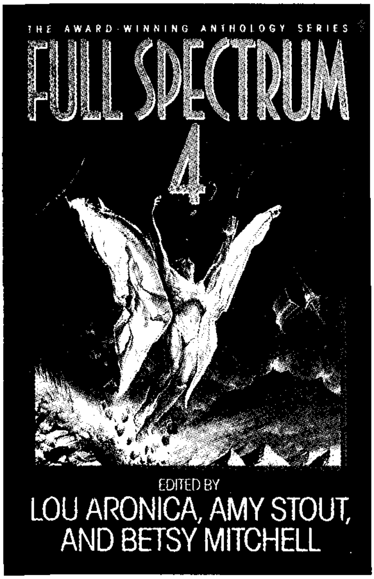
They followed the sound to the river bank, where a small hollow created a natural amphitheater. William Cooper stood above the crowd, on the stump of an oak tree. A group of farmers and folks from town stood near the stump, watching the preacher with anticipation and doing their best to sing the hymn. Mrs. Jones was in the front of the group, her raised hand beating the rhythm of the hymn in the air, like a dutiful singing teacher. Her voice rang above the others, a sturdy contralto that made up in volume what it lacked in grace. "He comes! He comes! The Judge severe! The Seventh Trumpet speaks him near. His lightnings flash; His thunders roll. How welcome to the faithful soul." Nadya didn't see Rufus anywhere.

On the far side of the hollow there was a clump of rivermen. They weren't singing. Rather, they watched the preacher in silence, chewing tobacco.

The hymn droned to a close, Mrs. Jones singing the last line as a determined solo. The preacher lifted his Bible and read in a sonorous voice. "Serve the Lord with gladness: come before His presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord He is God: it is He hath made us; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture."

Nadya frowned at that—she did not think much of sheep and she would rather not be called one. But no one else in the crowd seemed to mind.

The preacher closed the book with a snap and looked at the people gathered around him. "Brothers and sisters," he said to them. "We are the people of the Lord, we are His sheep. But I see many sheep that have strayed from the flock, lambs that are in danger from the wolves of Satan that linger outside the pasture gate. I see men who gamble, and men who curse and take the name of their Lord in vain, and men who lie and cheat and steal. I see women who wear gaudy clothing, women who are proud of their outward show, caring not for their inner beauty. How many of you could hold your heads up and walk through the pasture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gates into Heaven?" He looked out at the crowd, and a man in the front row spat a stream of tobacco juice over the river bank.

"Brothers and sisters," the preacher said. "I was a sinner too. Listen to me, brothers and sisters, for I was once like you. And then I found the love of the Lord."

"I'd sooner have the love of a good woman," called out one of the rivermen in the back, and his companions laughed.

"That way lies the path to Hell," the preacher shouted back.

"That way lies the path to glory," called the man, and again his friends laughed, slapping him on the back. "Have you ever walked that path, Preacher?"

"I walk the path of the Lord," the preacher said. "I follow the word of the Lord. You must listen to me." He brandished his Bible over his head, swayed as if he were about to fall from the stump, and he steadied himself. His eyes were blinking furiously. "You must listen," he cried, but Nadya could barely hear his voice over the catcalls of the rivermen.

"Listen," the preacher shouted. Then he tilted back his head and howled, a piercing wail that cut through the laughter of the hecklers. Mrs. Jones took a step back, startled by the howl, her hands suddenly still, clasped together as if in prayer. The preacher tilted back his head and howled again. When he stopped, the crowd was silent, watching him to see what would happen next.

"I hear you howling like the beasts you are," he snarled at the rivermen. "I hear you growling and snapping like the wolves of the forest. I hear you and the Lord hears you, and He judges you, as I am not fit to judge.

"Why have you come to this barren wilderness, brothers and sisters? Why have you come to this howling land, where wild beasts shriek in the night, where savage Indians lurk in the darkness?" He waited a moment, then filled the silence with a shout. "You have come here at the command of the Lord!"

"Not likely," yelled a riverman, but the preacher lifted his hands up over his head, waving the Bible as if it were a club.

"The Good Book commands us to be fruitful and multiply, to replenish the earth and subdue it," the preacher cried. "Our Lord commands us to have dominion over every living thing that moveth on the face of the earth. The Lord asks this of us, he sends us into the wilderness to claim it for His own. You have come to take this land for the Lord."

"Amen!" called a farmer who stood near Nadya. "Amen!"

"This land, this wild and desolate land—it can strike despair into a man's heart." The preacher's voice dropped. "I know it, brothers and sisters, for my own heart has been laid low by loneliness and fear. My own heart has ached for the comforts of civilization." He lowered his hands, bringing his Bible to his chest. "Just a few nights ago, brothers and sisters, when I lay shivering in the cold and the rain, I thought of turning my back on this land. I thought of returning to my home in Connecticut, of seeking an easier life, a life where a man can eat a fine dinner and sleep in a warm bed." His head was bowed and his tone was that of a man confiding his secret thoughts. "And I prayed to the Lord to send me a sign. Tell me what to do, oh Lord. Help me find the way."

He lifted his head. "In the darkness, wolves howled—a dreadful howling, like the shrieking of the souls burning in hell, doomed for all eternity to be wrapped in sheets of fire and brimstone."

Nadya glanced at Lottie, who was listening with rapt attention. "I always thought the wolves sounded nice," she murmured to Lottie. "Like singing."

"Hush," Lottie said. "I'm listening."

"You have heard the beasts, brothers and sisters, I know you have heard them," the preacher said. "Damned souls, spawn of Satan—they howl their anguish at the sky and turn, in anger, on the righteous children of the Lord. Imagine this sound—but imagine it near to you, as near to you as I am standing. The beasts were all around me, shrieking in anger and calling for blood."

Half a dozen stragglers joined the crowd, attracted by the howling and shouting.

"I lifted my head from my prayer, brothers and sisters, and I saw the eyes of wolves—great yellow eyes that flashed in the firelight, the eyes of devils glaring from the darkness. Demons from Hell, clad in the guise of wolves. Each as big as a man, grinning at me, showing their teeth and snarling."

Mrs. Jones fell to her knees, clasping her hands in prayer. "Save us, Lord, from the demons of Satan," she wailed.

"What did I do, brothers and sisters?" the preacher was saying. "What could I do against the demons of Satan?" He lifted his Bible, to remind them of its presence. "I trusted in the power of the Lord."

A chorus of fervent "Amens" drowned out the hooting of the hecklers.

"Here it is, brothers and sisters, here is my weapon—the word of the Lord. I lifted this Holy Book so that the beasts could see it, could tremble before the truth of the Lord. And I called out to the Lord. I called to Him: 'May the spirit come down, may it come like a fire, may it come in streams of fire, fire of the Lord come down and free the earth of this pestilence.' "

Three more women at the front of the crowd knelt together, rocking back and forth in time with the preacher's words. Whenever he paused for breath, they chorused "Amen." The men in the front were shifting from foot to foot, swaying in time with the kneeling women.

"The very air around me trembled," the preacher said. "I felt the power, the power, the power of sanctification. In the light of the burning fire, I saw a great figure—an angel standing in the flame with a sword that was also a flame." He spoke with unshakeable confidence, lifting his hand as if to show the Lord's angel to anyone who could see.

"The angel lifted his sword, holding it high so that it blazed and lit the forest all around, bringing the glory of God to the darkness. And the demon wolf leaped to do battle with the messenger of the Lord. I could hear the sword crackle as it passed through the air, I could smell the brimstone when it touched the demon wolf. And the monsters fled, banished into the darkness.

"I stood in the darkness before the angel and I heard the angel speak to me. 'Take this land for the Lord,' the angel said to me. 'Drive the Devil from this wilderness.' "

"Praise the Lord," Mrs. Jones shouted, and the others took up the words. "Praise the Lord!"

The preacher raised his voice, thundering over the moaning and shouting. "Take this land, brothers and sisters! Drive out the Devil! You must kill the demon wolf wherever you find him. Kill the spawn of Satan. Drive him from this fair land that it may belong to the Lord."

"Drive out the Devil!" Mrs. Jones cried. "Drive him out!"

The preacher glared at the crowd, sweeping Nadya and Lottie with his gaze. "Listen to the message of the angel of God," he cried. "There are some among you who have not accepted the power of the Lord. They think that they can make peace with the Devil. I tell these sinners that Hell stands ready to receive them. Hell opens its yawning mouth to receive them. Repent, or you will spend your eternity burning in the pit. Repent!"

Two women in the front row had been taken by the Holy Spirit—they lay on the ground, jerking and moaning uncontrollably. Others were falling to their knees, calling out to the Lord to save them.

"There is no peace with the Devil! There is no concord between the wolf and the lamb. Let us pray, brothers and sisters, let us pray that the spirit of fire will come to us and set us ablaze with the glory of the Lord." He bowed his head, lowering his voice. "Let us pray that we triumph over the demon wolf, let us take this land for the Lord, let us bring civilization to this howling wilderness. Pray with me, brothers and sisters. Pray with me and bring the power of the Lord to this land."

He bowed his head for a moment, then began a hymn, a sweet slow song that asked Jesus to watch over the wandering sheep. Nadya watched as the preacher walked among the men and women who knelt on the grassy ground. He laid a hand on one woman's head, patted another man on the shoulder. The two women who had been taken by the spirit lay in the grass, resting quietly now.

"Come on," Lottie said. "Let's go and get him to bless us."

"I don't want to," Nadya said, hanging back.

Lottie glanced at her. "What's the matter? Come on." She looked back toward the preacher. "There's Silas. We can go talk to him."

Nadya shook her head. "I have to go find my mama," she said. "She won't know where I am." She was trembling. She turned away from her friend, hurrying up the slope to the store.

On her way back to the store, Nadya met her father. "Papa, they are talking of hunting wolves."

She thought he might be angry—angry with the people for talking of hunting, angry with her for killing the sheep at the Jones farm—but he just looked at her sadly and took her hand. “We’d best be going home, Nadya. This is no place for us just now.”

That week, Dmitri began building a wagon to carry his family West. Marietta protested, saying that the madness would pass, but she could not dissuade her husband. He said that they had lingered too long already. There were too many people in Missouri. They needed to go West, where there was open land and forests.

Midway through the week, Hekiziah Jones stopped by the Rybak farm. “Hello,” he called out. “Hello, neighbor.”

Dmitri was trimming and smoothing a length of oak to make a spare axle for the wagon that would carry them westward. He had spent the morning reinforcing the wagonbed with oak planks. Dmitri glanced up from his work when Jones rode into the farmyard, reined in his horse, and swung down from the saddle.

“What’s all this? You emigrating?” Jones asked, staring at the wagon.

“Soon as we can,” Dmitri said.

Jones considered the wagon, then glanced around the farmyard. “I hadn’t heard tell that your farm was for sale.”

“You’re hearing it now,” Dmitri said. The man stank of unwashed clothing, chewing tobacco, and alcohol—hard cider, by the smell. “Too crowded here. Time to move on.”

Jones nodded and thoughtfully shifted the wad of chewing tobacco that was tucked in his lip. “Reasonable piece of land. Maybe I’ll make you an offer. You in a hurry to sell?”

Dmitri studied Jones’s face. “Two dollars an acre. Hard currency.”

Jones shifted the wad of tobacco again and spat a stream of brown juice. “Ain’t easy to come by so much hard currency.”

“Ain’t easy to be a farmer,” Dmitri said.

“I might manage a dollar an acre.”

Dmitri continued smoothing the oak shaft. Two dollars an acre for cleared land was already a bargain. Dmitri would need the hard currency once they reached Oregon. He would sell for less only if he had to. “I reckon I’ll wait until someone with a better understanding of the value of land comes along,” he said slowly.

“Suit yourself,” Jones said easily. “Suit yourself. I came to invite you for some hunting Saturday next. Me and my boys gonna kill the varmints that killed my sheep. Some other folks will be joining us. We’ll be gathering at the saloon. Thought you might like to come along.” Jones grinned, showing crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. “A little whiskey and a little hunting. And the preacher’s coming along to give us his blessing. A fine sporting afternoon.”

The full moon was Sunday night. Saturday’s hunt offered no danger to Dmitri’s family. He looked up from the axle. “Strange thing, Mr. Jones,” he said. “We never had wolf trouble around here before. Maybe you should keep better watch on those sheep of yours.”

Jones’s smile faltered. “What’s that?” he said.

"Never had any trouble with wolves," Dmitri said. "They never bothered my stock. Maybe you'd be better off bringing your sheep in at night."

Jones scowled. "What's that you're saying? You saying we shouldn't hunt those varmints?"

"Don't see that you have any call to," Dmitri said. "Don't see the need."

"You're saying you won't go hunting?"

"I'm saying I'll have nothing to do with your sporting day. Won't slaughter animals that never did me no harm. Won't sell my land for less than it's worth." Dmitri was a patient man. He grew angry slowly. But the full moon was near, and this man threatened his family so casually, so confidently, insolently chewing his tobacco and eyeing Dmitri's land. Dmitri shifted his weight, setting his feet wide apart. He hefted the axle in his hands, shifting the heavy shaft so that he could swing it as a club. He bared his teeth in a ferocious grin. "I'd suggest you get yourself off my land. You'd best hurry."

Jones eyed the axle and hurried to mount his horse. He jerked on the reins and kicked the horse savagely. Dmitri returned to his work, relieved that the hunt would be on Saturday. They were safe for this full moon.

Over dinner that night, Dmitri told his wife and daughter about the coming hunt. The sun was near setting. Its light shone through the open windows. There was no other light; they were saving oil for the journey. "Hekiziah Jones said they would have a hunt this Saturday," he told them. "They want to kill the wolves that killed their sheep."

Nadya shook her head. "That can't be so," she said. "Rufus said that he wouldn't hunt wolves."

Dmitri studied his daughter's face. "When did he do that?"

Nadya would not meet his eyes. "When I asked him," she said. Her voice had an edge to it, a slight tremor of contained emotion. "He said he wouldn't hunt wolves."

"When was that?" Dmitri asked. "When did you ask him?"

"When he brought me home from the quilting." Still, she would not meet his eyes.

"Look at me, Nadya," he said angrily. "Why won't you look at me?"

"She's upset, Dmitri," her mother said softly.

He looked at his wife. "What do you know about this?"

Nadya stood up and headed for the cabin door.

"Where are you going, Nadya?" Dmitri asked, shocked at her behavior.

"I'd best check to see that the chickens are locked up for the night," she said, and rushed away.

Dmitri turned to his wife, shaking his head. "What is all this about?" He was bewildered by his daughter's tears.

His wife took his hand in both of hers. "She can't hear you. She can only hear the roar of the blood rushing in her ears. She is growing up." She lifted her eyes to meet his. "Do you remember how hard that was?"

"That boy and his family—they're no friends of ours. The father is a drunkard; the mother is a zealot. The son is a gambler. He means her no good."

"I know that. I read the cards. I told her that she shouldn't love this boy. I told her to take care. Might as well tell the river not to flow downhill." She released his hand. "What else can we do? Lock our daughter up? Deny her nature?" She shook her head. "We must hurry to build the wagon and prepare for our journey. She will be very sad when we go, but on the trail to Oregon, she will forget him." She smiled at her husband. "Be happy that we have time to prepare. She will survive the pain of heartbreak as we all have before her."

Dmitri shook his head slowly. He pushed himself away from the table and went to the door. By the light of the moon, he could see Nadya standing at the edge of the forest, leaning against the split rail fence. He went to stand at her side.

"Hello, Nadya," he said softly.

"Hello, Papa."

The moonlight was bright enough to cast shadows.

"Do you remember," Dmitri asked, "when I used to tell you stories with shadows?"

"I remember," Nadya said softly. She kept her face turned away so that he could not see her eyes.

"They were lies, those stories," Dmitri said. He hesitated, wishing that he could see her face. "In my stories, the wolf always wins. That's a lie."

"But the wolf could win, Papa. Don't you think? I think the wolf could win."

"The hunters win. They always have and they always will."

Nadya turned to face him then. Her jaw was set and her expression was stubborn. "Rufus said he wouldn't hunt wolves. He won't let them go hunting," she said.

Dmitri hesitated. "I'm not the only one who lies."

She turned her face to the forest again.

"The Oregon Territory is a beautiful land," he said. "Acres and acres of rich land, with never a person nearby. That's the place for us. We'll be emigrating as soon as the wagon's done."

She didn't answer.

"We will be happy there. Far from all the hunters and fools. Are you listening to me?"

She didn't answer.

At last, he sighed heavily. "Come inside when you get cold," he told her, and stamped back into the warmth of the cabin. When she came back inside to sit by the fire, he ignored her, talking with Marietta about the things they would need for the trip, telling her about the route that they would follow. Nadya climbed to her bed in the loft, but he kept up the cheerful conversation, knowing that she would hear him, hoping that she would listen to reason.

The hunt was to be on Saturday, the day before the moon was full. All would have been well, had it not been for the rain. The rain brought bad luck.

Nadya woke on Saturday to the sound of raindrops rattling against the greased paper windows. A thunderstorm had swept in during the night. The wind shook the branches of the trees and the rain hammered down, filling the ditches and gullies to overflowing.

Her parents tried to act as if nothing were wrong. They went about their work, as if this day were like any other. But Nadya could smell the tension in the air.

Sunday morning dawned wet and cold. In the morning, Nadya watched the sky and prayed that the rain would continue. But early in the afternoon, the rain became a drizzle. Water dripped from the branches of the trees, but the sky was clearing.

Nadya sat on the porch, mending a tear in her father's second best pair of trousers. Through the half-opened door, she listened to the murmur of her parents' voices inside the cabin.

"Surely they wouldn't begin a hunt so late in the day," her mother said.

"Depends on how much they've been drinking," her father's voice rumbled. "Depends on how foolish they feel. From what little I've seen of Rufus and Hekiziah Jones, I would guess that they're foolish enough."

Nadya set the mending in her lap. He was wrong about Rufus. He had to be.

"We'd best put some space between ourselves and the town before the moon rises," her father said.

"We can't pack the wagon quickly enough," her mother said. "We haven't time."

"We'll leave the wagon and save our skins. We have no choice."

Nadya knew there would be no hunt. Her father wouldn't believe her, but she knew that Rufus would stop them. He wouldn't allow it. He had said so, down by the river.

But even as she thought about Rufus, she felt uneasy. It would be difficult for him to persuade the others. He might need her help. While her parents argued, she slipped away to the barn, saddled the mule, and headed for town.

When Nadya was eight, her father had built their barn from roughhewn logs. Neighbors had helped raise the walls and the ridge beam, leaving her father to complete the structure. Nadya's father told her not to climb on the newly erected frame. "It's dangerous," he had said. "You'll fall."

The next day, when her father was out of sight, she climbed to the top of the barn and walked the length of the roof's ridgebeam. She started with confidence, arms extended like a tightrope walker's. She was halfway across when she looked down at the ground far below. In that moment, she swayed, feeling suddenly dizzy. Just before she recovered her balance, she imagined what it would be like to fall, arms flailing at the beam and missing, body tumbling to break on the ground below. Her legs trembled and she could feel her heart pounding. And then, despite the panic, she continued to the far end of the beam.

As she rode the mule into town, she felt as she had when she stood on the ridgebeam. Defiant and frightened. The ground lay far below her, and she did not dare look down.

She found Rufus in the tavern, playing cards. She recognized the other men at the table, all of them neighbors: Hekiziah Jones, Tom Williams, Mr. Shaw, Mr. Whitman. Their faces looked unfamiliar in the dim light of the tavern, skin slack with drink, eyes rimmed with red.

Mr. Shaw frowned at her. "What are you doing here?" he asked her. "This is no place for a young lady."

"I came to talk to Rufus." Her voice was strained. The smell of the tavern—tobacco spit, whiskey, and sweat—made her feel sick.

"Does your Papa know you're here?" Mr. Shaw said. "I don't think it's proper. . . ."

Rufus looked up from his cards and stared at her. She could not read his expression. He tossed his cards face down on the table and pushed back his chair. When he stood, he swayed, unsteady on his feet. "How do, Miss Nadya," he said, his words a little slurred. "I'd be pleased to talk with you. Let's leave these fellas behind."

He took her arm and led her toward the door. Behind her, Nadya heard Tom Williams's voice, but she could not make out the words. All the men laughed—an unfriendly sound containing no merriment.

Outside, the day was clearing. The clouds that had covered the sun had dissipated. Muddy puddles filled the ruts of the dirt track that ran past the tavern's front porch. The livery stable and store had been washed clean; the white façades glistened in the late afternoon sunshine. The street was deserted.

"Rufus," she said. "I had to talk to you."

"Darling, I've been thinking about you too," he said. He put his arms around her and started to pull her into an embrace. He reeked of whiskey. "We'll go to the hayloft in the livery stable. No one will bother us there."

She pulled back, shaking his arms off her. "My father said that you were going hunting for wolves."

He frowned. "We have time. They won't go hunting without me." He reached out and took hold of her hand. "I've missed you, Nadya."

"You're going hunting?" she asked. The air seemed suddenly colder. She could feel a trembling that began deep inside her. It had not yet reached the surface.

"Not yet. I tell you, we have time." With his free hand, he fumbled at the buttons on the front of her dress. His fingers were clumsy and the buttons did not cooperate.

"You promised," Nadya said, taking a step back away from him. "You promised you wouldn't hunt wolves."

He stared at her, then burst out laughing. "Not hunt wolves? That's the most damn fool idea I've ever heard."

"You said you wouldn't," she said.

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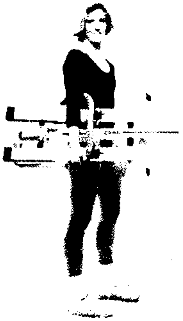

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"Never said anything like it," he protested.

"Down by the river," she said. "You promised me you wouldn't hunt wolves."

He was looking at her with the same expression he had worn when she climbed on top of him to satisfy her desire. He was astounded and bewildered and disapproving. "Nadya, I reckon I got to hunt wolves," he said. "If we don't kill the wolves, they'll kill our sheep. What do those varmints matter to you? Come on, now." He tried to pull her to him. She jerked her wrist away.

"You mustn't kill wolves," she said. "You can't."

He glared at her then. "Don't you tell me what I can't do." His voice had lost its wheedling tone. "Just because we've had a little fun together doesn't mean you can tell me what to do. I'll kill every wolf in the county, if I like."

"But you said. . . ."

"You're a crazy one," he told her. "You don't act like a normal woman. I didn't say nothing about wolves."

"My mother warned me," Nadya said. The trembling had reached the surface. She was cold, very cold, and she could not stop shaking. "She told me that you were dangerous. I should have listened."

She turned away, walking toward the mule that was tied at the hitching post.

"Hold on there," he said. He grabbed her shoulder. As she turned to face him, she lifted an elbow and caught him with a clout on the side of the head. He stumbled and fell.

"Leave me be," she said. "Just leave me be."

She mounted the mule and kicked the beast into a trot. When she was halfway down the street, she glanced back and saw Rufus struggling to his feet.

"The weather's clear," he shouted—to the men in the saloon, to Nadya's retreating back. "Let's go hunting. Let's kill some wolves!"

She kicked the mule again. The sun was already low in the sky. She could feel the pull of the full moon—a sensation in her belly and her crotch. For the first time, she feared the Change.

The ride home was long and she felt sick to her stomach, sick at heart. As she came into the farmyard, she saw her mother, waiting for her on the porch.

Nadya swung off the mule and ran into her mother's arms. "I saw Rufus," she said. "I saw him and the other men and . . . " Then she wept, unable to stop the tears.

Her father put his hand on her shoulder. "Come," he said. "There is little time left."

They had only gotten as far as the riverbank when the moon rose.

William Cooper came to the tavern and said a prayer before the hunt began. It was clear from his expression that he disapproved of drinking and gambling. But Rufus guessed that he disapproved of wolves more.

"May the All Mighty God give us strength to overcome the forces of darkness," the preacher prayed. "We come in Your name, to do away with the beasts of waste and desolation that devour Your innocent creatures. We call on You to bless our bullets and guide our aim."

The prayer droned on, and Rufus kept his head bowed. He was thinking of Nadya—still angry that she had pulled away, that she had demanded that he stop the hunt. She was crazy, that was clear. A pretty girl, but crazy. There were many other pretty girls in town.

When Cooper finally wound down, Rufus murmured "Amen." They toasted the preacher a few times. Then there was another delay when the preacher had insisted on coming along. They finally got underway just before sunset. It didn't matter, Rufus figured. The full moon would provide the light they needed. They were all accustomed to night hunting.

The air was crisp and cool, but the glow of the whiskey kept Rufus warm. The hounds set out, and the men followed on horseback. They took the trail north along the river, where Rufus had spotted wolf sign, now and again.

The sun set and the full moon rose. With the setting of the sun, colors faded from the forest: the world was black and white with shades of silver-gray.

At the river, the dogs found a scent, and they gave voice, a deep musical baying that echoed across the valley. Rufus's horse ran ahead of the others, sure-footed even in the darkness. Behind him, Rufus could hear Cooper calling for the Lord's assistance in this hunt against the demons of Satan.

Rufus had never believed in demons, despite his mother's convictions. But he liked hunting and he favored the darkness. He forgot his anger in the excitement. The chill air washed the whiskey fumes away, leaving his head clear.

The river was at flood. The muddy waters swirled around the bases of oak trees that normally stood high on the bank. Once, the dogs lost the trail and cast about frantically, running up and down the riverbank and sniffing the muddy ground. But they found the scent again and coursed along the bank, heading north.

Rufus was in the lead when the hounds' baying grew more frantic. He spurred his tired horse. The dogs had three wolves trapped on a jutting cliff where the river had eaten the bank away. The wolves stood with their backs to the edge, holding off the dogs. As Rufus approached, the biggest wolf rushed the hounds, snapping and snarling.

Rufus waited until the animal broke clear of the pack of hounds and squeezed off a shot. The lead wolf tumbled, somersaulting forward as his front legs went out from under him. Half the dog pack closed in on the fallen wolf; the rest pursued the other two. Rufus reined in his horse and reloaded, then spurred his horse after the pack of hounds.

He caught up with them a short distance away. He could see the two wolves bounding toward the river. He aimed and fired: good shot; one animal fell. The last wolf ran ran toward the river's edge. He could see it clearly, and he struggled to reload, but his horse shied, spilling the powder. He fumbled with the rifle.

Too late: the animal reached the cliff one leap ahead of the running hounds and launched itself over the edge. The dogs milled in a pack, yelping and snarling. Below, where the river ran like liquid silver in the moonlight, Rufus could see a dark head—the wolf struggling in the current. He did not waste the powder firing at the distant animal, but used the butt of his rifle to club the dogs away from the body of the fallen female.

By the time the other men arrived, the swimming wolf had been carried south by the current. The others built a fire, while Rufus skinned the two carcasses. The two wolves were in fine condition, fat and healthy, with thick fur.

He ran his knife down the female's belly and peeled back the skin, working carefully to avoid spoiling the fur. In the cold night air, steam rose from the body.

The preacher was the last to arrive. He stood by the fire with the others and called for a prayer of thanks. Rufus continued skinning the wolf while the preacher thanked God for their salvation.

After the prayer, Rufus went to work on the male wolf. He could hear the men around the fire talking about the wolf that got away. "It'll drown, sure enough," he heard his father say. The male's body had cooled and Rufus' hands were icy by the time he was done. He bundled the furs, then went to the fire to warm his hands and share the whiskey bottle that was making its way around the circle. Someone was telling a story about another hunt where they had killed four wolves, and someone else told of wolf hunting on the plains. Tales of blood and excitement.

The moon set and they finished the bottle. Rufus strapped the wolf skins behind his saddle, patting his horse when it shied away from the scent. The day was dawning, gray and dim.

Rufus parted company with the others at the turnoff that led to the Rybak farm and his own family's farm. His father was returning to town to continue the card game they had left. Rufus continued home alone.

Nadya woke to find herself lying by the river at a bend where the current had created a narrow gravel beach. She was naked. Her skin was marked with bruises, streaked with river silt and blood. During the long chase, brambles had slashed her. The dogs had snapped at her feet and legs, leaving bloody gashes behind.

She sat up and hugged her knees for warmth. Early morning: the sun was barely above the horizon. Pale mist rose from the river, shifting and flowing like the water itself. From years of hunting the area, she recognized this stretch of river. She was just a mile or so downstream of the farm.

Her memories were blurred: darkness, panic, pain. Running—she remembered running among the trees, terrified by the baying of the hounds. And shouting—she remembered men's voices, shouting and singing and laughing like devils. Her body remembered the tugging of the river's currents, dragging her this way and that. Her muscles ached—she had fought the current, paddling desperately for this small beach.

She shivered. Where were her parents? That, she did not remember. Perhaps they had been carried further downstream. If that were the case, they would meet her at the farm. Surely, if she found her way to the farm, they would be there.

She clambered up the bank. She was used to going barefoot, but the brambles growing by the river scratched her bare skin and snagged in her hair. Under the oak trees at the top of the bank, the going was easier: last autumn's leaves, now damp and half rotted, were soft underfoot. She forced her tired muscles into a trot, telling herself that she would see her mother and father as soon as she reached the cabin. Of course, they would have to be at the cabin.

She was almost to the cabin when she heard a man shout. She did not recognize the voice exactly. At least, recognition did not penetrate the haze that occupied her mind, a peculiar cloudiness, as if her head were filled with river mist that ebbed and swirled. But the voice sounded familiar—that voice had called out to the hounds the night before, urging them on. The voice called to her again, and she ran faster, ducking through the trees, ignoring the branches that scratched her legs.

"Mama!" she called as she ran toward the cabin. "Mama! Papa!" The mule grazing in the field lifted its head to watch her.

She pushed the cabin door open. The room was empty, but she snatched her father's rifle from its place beside the door and the powder horn from the peg on the wall. She loaded the rifle quickly, her hands trembling in the cold. She spilled the black powder, but did not stop until she had rammed the bullet into place.

Still naked, she held the loaded rifle. With one foot, she kicked open the cabin door.

She smelled blood. Dried blood, mingled with the scent of wolf. She recognized the man on the horse—vaguely, dimly, through the river mist that filled her head—recognized him by his smell. His name didn't come to her—names were not really important yet. Someday soon, maybe they would be, but just then, names had not returned to her.

But his smell—that she knew. It was the smell of passion and the smell of death. Sex and blood and river water and dogs baying as they rushed through the night, chasing wild things that ran and ran and ran, but never escaped. The smell told her what to do, even before she saw the two bundles of gray fur, tied to the saddle behind him.

"Nadya," the man said, and she lifted the rifle and shot him, point blank, not thinking, not thinking at all.

His horse shied at the sound, and shied again at the sudden limpness of the man in the saddle. The man slumped, then fell, sliding gracelessly to the ground, lying face down with one foot still caught in the stirrup. The smell of fresh blood joined the smell of dried blood, and a brilliant red stain spread across the back of the man's shirt where the bullet had left his body.

Nadya freed the man's foot from the stirrup and let the body lie in the dirt. She spoke soothingly to the horse, murmuring the French endearments with which her mother had once comforted her. She tied the horse to the split rail fence and returned to the cabin. She walked past the body, but did not look at it.

She stirred up the embers and built a fire. She did not think. She built a fire and heated water for tea. She washed herself, using a rag and warm water to wipe away the dirt and the blood. Even when she put on her hunting trousers and a warm shirt, she could not stop shivering. The cold came from deep inside her.

The water boiled and she made tea, carefully measuring the dried leaves into the pot. Her mother liked her tea just so—Nadya was careful to make it properly, and she sat by the fire, sipping her tea. She caught herself listening for the sound of her parents' footsteps. Her mind shied away from the memory of the two bundles of fur on the back of the horse. She had another cup of tea.

Then she took the shovel and went to a place in the woods where the ground was soft. The horse carried the man's body.

She buried the two bundles of fur side by side in a single grave. She stood by the grave for a time, unable to pray. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. . . . I didn't mean. . . ." But the words stopped. She bowed her head and stood silent again. "Papa," she said at last. "There was nothing wrong with your stories. They weren't lies. The wolf can win. Just not here. Not now. But somewhere, the wolf can win."

Some distance away, she buried the body of the man who had killed her parents. Rufus's body. The name had returned to her with the memory of love and betrayal. But she said nothing over his grave. She had nothing to say to him.

Then she packed a few things: gunpowder, salt, tea, a pot in which to boil water, two blankets, her hunting knife, a hatchet, a pistol. Necessities only.

She closed the door on her way out of the cabin. She lifted the gate that kept the pigs in their pen, shooed the cattle and the mule from the stable. Then she tied her small bundle behind the saddle and mounted.

She turned the horse's head toward the wilderness of the Oregon Territory. America was a big country. Out there, the land was empty; the forests were thick and green. Out there, she would find a place where she could be happy.

She kicked the horse into a trot and rode west, leaving childhood behind. ●

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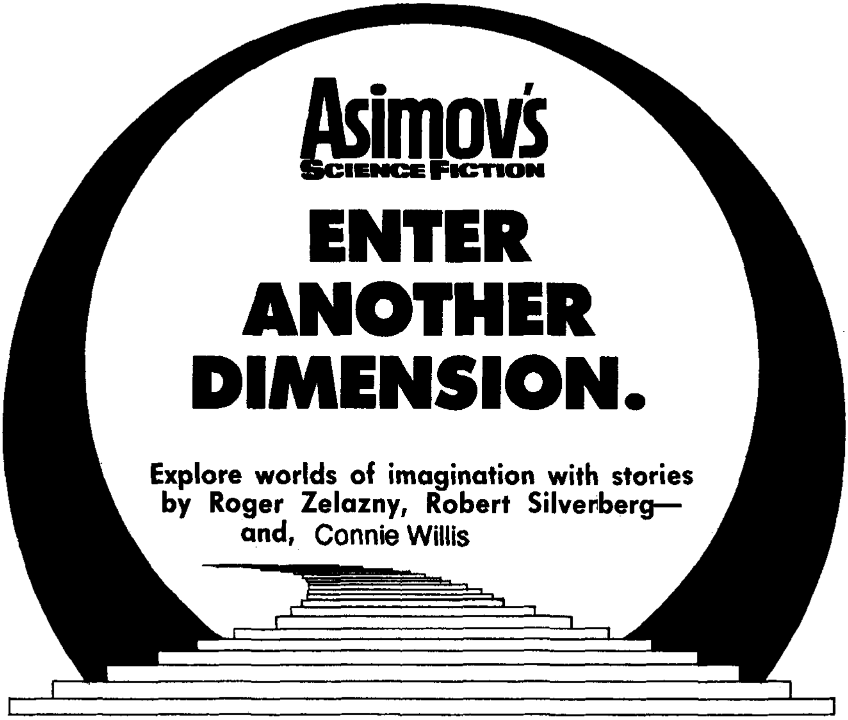

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William John Watkins

THE BEGGAR IN THE LIVING ROOM

William John Watkins is an English professor at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey. He has published eight science fiction novels including *Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer* and *The Last Deathship Off Antares.* His other publications include stories and poems in *Asimov's, October Dreams, Twilight Zone Magazine,* and the original *Shadows* anthology.

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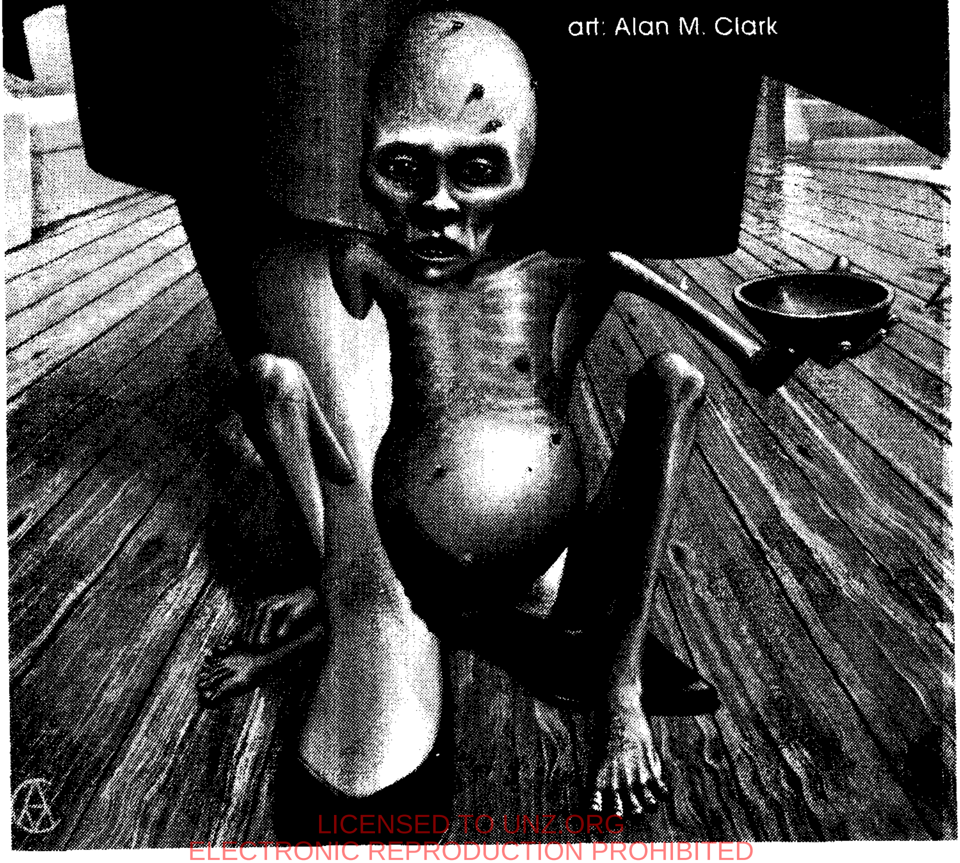


I know there must be something wrong with me for what I did. I mean, I was lucky to be there, and "Aunt" Zsa-Zsa and "Uncle" Howard were as nice to me as anybody could be. Aunt Zsa-Zsa was prettier than my mother. She told me the first time they came to the hospital that her real name was Gladys, but she said everybody called her Zsa-Zsa even in high school. She said they called Uncle Howard "Super-dork," but he looked all right to me even from the beginning. A little too tall, maybe, and a little skinny, but tan and confident, and he even laughed when she said that, like it was a long way behind him and he was the one who had had the last laugh.

All my life I dreamed about living with somebody like them, even when my mother was alive. And when she died, and I had to live with Lester, my step-father, I used to daydream that he'd die and somebody like them from my mother's family would come and take me to live with them.

But nobody did, even though I know she had a brother and some sisters somewhere. I was real surprised that it was somebody from Lester's family, and a cousin at that. I was even more surprised that anybody like Uncle Howard could be even distantly related to a jerk like Lester, and I wished they were really related to me. Of course, Aunt Zsa-Zsa said the moment they saw me on TV, just standing there in the middle of all those wrecked cars, they knew they had to come.

It was a big wreck, nineteen cars altogether and a jack-knifed trailer truck, and we were one of the first three. I'm not even sure Lester didn't cause it. I was sitting in the back seat, which I always did when he was drunk, and he was reaching over the seat to take a swat at me for something, I don't remember what, maybe there wasn't even anything.

I was down on the floor ducking out of his reach, but the next thing I knew, I was crunched up against the back of the front seat, and the door beside me was swinging open. I got out and everything seemed sort of out of focus. Cars were still banging into one another back along the Turnpike, and I heard a big metallic crash and a loud bang every couple steps, but I didn't put together what it was. Not even when one of the cars went shooting past beside me, scraping sparks off the cement restraining wall.

The trailer truck was jack-knifed and over on its side and I remember how awesome it looked underneath, and one of the back wheels was still spinning but the one next to it wasn't. I looked back at our car, but it didn't look like our car. It only seemed about half as long on one side, and it was wedged into another car that was half as long the other way. Lester's side was all squashed and crunched like something really big had sat on it. There wasn't any blood or anything. Just some puddles of oil near the trailer truck, and the smell of gasoline everywhere. Cars were going by slowly on the far side of the wall, and there were brakes screeching back up the road.

I could see later, when they showed the video on TV, how I could have been killed with the cars still crashing into one another and kicking each other forward and ricocheting off. But it wasn't like that at the time. It was sort of quiet and foggy on the outside of everything. I guess the news crew was passing by on the other side when the trailer truck went over Lester's side of our car after we rearended the other car, and flipped. Or maybe they just appear out of nowhere anytime anything big goes on. But this guy with a big camera was sweeping back and forth with it and then pointing it right at me. I wanted to wave to somebody but I didn't have anybody to wave to, so I just stood there and looked at him like a jerk. And then another car went scraping along the cement wall behind me and then there was another big bang.

They used that footage for commercials for the news for the next three days, and then they put it in the pictures that come on whenever they announce the news is coming up, so a lot of people got to see it a lot of times. Aunt Zsa-Zsa said they saw it the very first time, and even before they found out I was "Lester's child" they wanted to help me.

The first time Aunt Zsa-Zsa called me "Lester's child" I tried to tell her I wasn't, but she said that was just a technicality and your parents are who raise you not who gave you your genes. I think she was thinking of herself when she said that, but that was all right with me. I didn't think of her as my mother, but she fussed over me more than my mother ever did, and I liked that.

Uncle Howard wasn't as gushy as Aunt Zsa-Zsa, but he was nice. I don't think he ever said a hard word to me, no matter what I did, and I was used to a lot more than that. They were like TV parents, they never yelled, not even at one another, and when I did something wrong, they sat down and talked to me and explained why it was wrong and what I ought to do about it. Which is one reason why I felt so bad about what I did and that Lester was right and I'm a selfish little bastard and ought to be living out on the street like a dog.

I guess that was why I didn't feel too bad about Lester getting killed, but Aunt Zsa-Zsa said it was okay I didn't cry over Lester, everybody grieves in their own way. But I wasn't grieving. I was tired of getting slapped around and I was going to run away in another couple months anyway, and the accident just saved me the trouble. But I didn't tell *her* that, which I guess shows what kind of person I was from the beginning. I didn't want her not to like me, especially after they took me home from the hospital and I saw where we were living.

I couldn't believe the house. I mean the car was amazing enough, a real experimental model, and it didn't matter to me if Uncle Howard didn't own it. He said he was just working on it, putting in some electronic equipment. He was some kind of electronic genius, and whenever they came to visit me in the hospital he would spend most of the time fiddling with the TV trying to get the depth clearer and the color better. Mostly, he'd end up shaking his head at it and mumbling about inferior design and primitive technology. The TV always looked fine to me, but then I was used to this little two dimensional color set, so anything in three dimensions was great, even if the screen *was* on the small side.

Anyway, the house looked like something I used to see on "Houses of the Rich and Famous" whenever Lester wasn't around. He'd always yell if he saw it on when he came in, but then he'd always yell about something when he came in. He'd say, "What do you want to look at people like that for, you're never going to be one of them!" He used to call them the Rich Bastards. I think I was ten before I found out that that wasn't a kind of person, like Italian, or Mexican. But if it was, Aunt Zsa-Zsa and Uncle Howard were certainly Rich Bastards.

The house was at the end of this big arching drive of white stones, with a wall of white stone curving along it and flowers and bushes all along the bottom. The house was low and real long, with walls made out of windows that were all shiny on the outside so you couldn't see through them. It was like a tree with branches coming off either side. It even had a fountain in the middle of a pond that shot water way up in the air. When I said something to them about it, they just looked at one another and laughed, and Uncle Howard smiled like he'd built it himself.

When we got to the door, Uncle Howard smiled at Aunt Zsa-Zsa like they had a private joke, and opened the door for me to go in first. I never saw a room as big as that. It wasn't much higher than an ordinary room, but it looked like you could park a dozen cars in it and still have plenty of room to walk around. It had a couple of white leather couches around the walls, and a white fluffy rug, and at the far end, a long glass table and a lot of chairs with high backs of carved metal.

I was so busy looking around I didn't see the kid. He was right in front of me sitting on the floor, but I never saw him until I was right on top of him and I jumped back and yelled, and Uncle Howard laughed and Aunt Zsa-Zsa bit her lip trying not to.

He was this little African kid with really skinny arms like sticks, and a big swollen belly. He was sitting there with his bony knees folded up under him, long pipes with big knobby knees, and he was holding this empty wooden bowl up toward me. He had no cheeks and little stumpy teeth and big, huge eyes and his head was bald and there were flies walking up across his eyelids and he didn't even swat them away. He just looked up at me and held out this bowl like he was begging, and he was so sad looking it made me want to cry.

I turned around and looked at Aunt Zsa-Zsa and Uncle Howard and even Aunt Zsa-Zsa burst out laughing. I looked back at the kid and he was putting the bowl down beside him like it was just too heavy to hold up any more. I couldn't believe they thought it was funny, and I squatted down and tried to tell him it would be all right and we'd get him some food, but he wouldn't look up at me. He looked like his head was just too heavy for him to lift, and I turned around and screamed at Uncle Howard and Aunt Zsa-Zsa, "What are you laughing at?!"

I was really mad, and disappointed, and I yelled really loud, but all it did was make them laugh harder, until Aunt Zsa-Zza walked over to the kid and I though she was going to lean down and pick him up, but she walked right through him! I screamed. And then she looked sad, and told Uncle Howard to stop laughing and stooped down and took my hands and said, "We're sorry. We thought you understood. He's not *real.*" She waved a hand through the kid, but he looked so solid except where her hand passed through him, for a minute I was afraid he was real and *she* was a ghost or something. And then I was afraid I was going to wake up standing on that highway with some car barreling down on me.

I must've looked pretty scared because she looked very worried and said, "Tell him, Howard."

He stopped laughing and came over and said, "He's a hologram." Then he looked like he thought maybe he was being too technical. "You know," he said, "like 3-D TV only lifesized and without the box."

I knew what a hologram was, they showed us some in school, but they were nothing like the kid. They were little and they had this kind of fogginess around them, and even though they looked like they were three dimensional, they didn't really look real. They just looked like three dimensional pictures. And they didn't move. The kid moved and he looked like he was *really* there.

But Uncle Howard stepped inside him, and even though the kid moved and lifted his bowl back up again, his arms stuck out of Uncle Howard's legs. It was pretty horrible looking. His face would appear and disappear out of Uncle Howard's thigh, and when I wasn't telling myself it was just a picture, it made my skin crawl.

"It's what I do," Uncle Howard said. He seemed really sorry that I was scared, and I felt stupid about it.

"I never saw one like that before," I said.

Uncle Howard smiled. "Neither has anybody else," he said. "At least not this good." He looked very proud of his work, and when I wasn't seeing the kid as a kid, I could see why. It was really amazing. "In a couple of years," he said, "You're going to see something like this every time you walk into somebody's living room."

The kid's face poked out of his leg as he said it and I must've looked a little jumpy because he said, "Not *him*. He's just the first image I took off the TV news to elaborate on."

I guess I looked relieved because he almost started laughing again. "Like *this*," he said, and he stepped out of the image and walked over to the wall to the middle couch. He sat down very slowly and very deliberately and took a remote out of his pocket and fiddled with it a little. And the couch disappeared.

He was sitting there on empty air, and then he let himself collapse backwards onto the floor and I laughed in spite of myself. When I looked back at the kid, he was gone too. I felt like an idiot, and I laughed because I didn't want them to laugh at me. Aunt Zsa-Zsa put her arm around me and said, "We didn't mean to scare you."

I told her I wasn't scared, and we went over and helped Uncle Howard up. He showed me around the room, letting me guess what was real and what wasn't, and I was wrong as often as I was right. Then we went out the front door again and he walked through the pond and stuck his hand under the fountain and except that the water disappeared where it hit his hand and reappeared, still falling, directly under it, the fountain still looked real. He waved me to come under it with him and even though I knew what it was, I still hesitated because I felt like I was going to get wet.

When we went back in, the kid was back, still looking up, raising his bowl, letting it drop, still empty. Aunt Zsa-Zsa came through a doorway at the far end of the room carrying two big ice cream cones for me and Uncle Howard. She walked through the glass table and a high backed chair and right through the little African kid, and when she came out the other side of him, he raised his bowl after her like he felt her go by.

Uncle Howard looked around the room like the holograms pleased him more than the real things. "TV's a ghost," he said. "In five years, every house in America will be like ours." I never forgot that.

You would think I would have gotten used to it, living there. It was summer and there was no school, so I spent most of my time in the house, but even though I learned what chairs you could sit on and which you couldn't, I never really got used to it. And I never got used to that African kid. I always walked around him, and I would've been a lot happier if Uncle Howard turned it off, but he rarely did, and I didn't want to ask him because I thought they'd think I wasn't happy living there. But it still seemed to me like every time somebody walked by him with some food, his eyes followed them.

I knew that was crazy even then, and I thought Lester was right, I was just a "crazy little son of a bitch" like he'd always said and probably good for nothing like he'd said, too. But I couldn't shake it, and every time Uncle Howard came up with a new one, it was worse. Even though they were sorry they upset me the first time, Uncle Howard liked to spring them on me. I guess he thought once I understood what they were, they wouldn't bother me any more. And I guess that would have been all right if he'd taken them off the cartoons or some comedy. But he always took them from the news, and the bad news at that.

The second time he did it, I was sitting on one of the real couches watching cartoons on the 3-D wallscreen and this young Korean student in a white shirt and black pants came flying out of the wall beside it. He landed on all fours and looked around wild-eyed like he didn't know where in the world he was or how the hell he got there.

He twisted around toward the way he came and lifted an arm either to turn or protect himself. But before he could get up, this uniformed arm came swinging out of the wall and the club caught him across the side of his face right above his eye. It snapped his head around to the right, and two of his teeth came flying out past his cheek. His head went all the way around to the point of his shoulder, and his body rolled right along with it until he twirled around in the air and landed face down. Blood started seeping out under his face like his whole face was broken open.

And then a whole body came out after the arm and the club. It belonged to a short stocky cop in a white police helmet with a black face shield like a motorcycle helmet's. He had a clear plastic shield on his left arm, and his uniform pants were torn around his knee like he fell and skinned it. He stepped into a crouch and raised his club up again. It was one of those yard long flexible clubs, some sort of springy stuff covered with rubber, but you could tell it hit hard as steel.

You could hear it swish through the air as he brought it down, and thump as it hit. Every time he swung, he grunted, and the nightstick made a heavy thump on the guy's back and on his legs, and on his back again. Then the cop stepped up and took it with both hands and raised it up over his head, and the shield went right up with it. And then he brought it down right on the top back of the guy's skull.

It made a sick wet sound when it hit, and the guy's head broke like an egg. A piece of eggshell came away with the club, stuck to it with blood and hair. And every time the cop hit the guy, the club would bend at the end and sort of dive into the wound. And each time there was a crunching sound and more of the shell broke away and got packed into the skull. And when the club came up, drops of blood flew off it, and there was so much blood on the edge of the shield that it was dripping off the bottom corner.

I started shouting for him to stop it, stop it, stop it! And he stopped, and looked up right at me like he could see me, and then he turned around and started to run, but he disappeared into the wall halfway through the second step.

The other guy was still lying there, but there was blood all over him, in streaks and sprinkles down the back of his shirt, and the puddle under him was wide and thick and sticky looking. I knelt down beside him and, I don't know why, but I put my finger in it. I didn't feel anything, of course. Uncle Howard couldn't do *that* yet.

Right then, Aunt Zsa-Zsa came into the room and looked at the dead guy, right into his head where the brain was all churned up and looked like mashed potatoes and ketchup with hair in it, and said, "Dinner's ready in a minute, what kind of salad dressing do you want?"

Then Uncle Howard came in and said, "What do you think?"

I said, "They ought to shoot that son of a bitch!"

Uncle Howard looked like he didn't know what I was talking about, and he looked at Aunt Zsa-Zsa and they both said, "Who?"

"That fucking cop!" I said.

They just looked at one another and shook their heads. "You should really try not to use that kind of language," Aunt Zsa-Zsa said. "I don't mind it really, but some people would think poorly of you because of it."

Uncle Howard nodded. "It's all right among the boys," he said, "and it doesn't upset us, but you don't want to get in the habit of using it. It doesn't sound good."

There was nothing I could do but apologize. I told Aunt Zsa-Zsa I was sorry, but she said, "It doesn't offend *me*, dear. We just don't want you to get in trouble at school or anything like that."

I looked at the guy on the floor and wondered if he got into trouble at school. Uncle Howard said, "So what did you think?"

I said, "It wasn't right."

Uncle Howard looked disappointed. "Oh," he said, "I thought I had it down."

I said, "Had what down?"

"The sound," he said. "Didn't you notice?"

I realized *that* was what was different, the sound. The little beggar in the living room didn't make any sound. But this one sounded so real, it made me believe the cop and the student were real even though I saw them come through the wall.

"That's why it was so real," I said.

Uncle Howard smiled. "Wait'll I broaden the depth of field," he said, "it'll be like you're there."

He was right, even though it took him a while, almost until the end of the summer. I went into the kitchen about five days before school started and got a glass of soda. Lester never bought soda, just beer, and if I asked him to get some, he'd say, "What the hell do you think I am, made of money?" Once I drank some of his beer and filled it back up with water, but he caught me and beat hell out of me.

But Aunt Zsa-Zsa was always stocking the refrigerator with soda, and filling up the cupboards with chips and pretzels, and asking me what kind of junk food I wanted. There was always ice cream in the refrigerator, and cookies and anything else I wanted, and if there wasn't, we'd go for a drive and get some. When I used to daydream about a place to live, the food wasn't even *that* good.

I came back into the living room with a bag of potato chips under my arm and a big glass of root beer; there were refugees everywhere.

In fact, it wasn't the living room at all, but a mountainside, some dirt and grass and a steep path stretching back down through a lot of jagged rocks into a valley. The whole path was one long chain of people, staggering up, falling, helping one another, walking over one another, sitting down at the edge of the path to rest, light-skinned people with dark brown eyes, men with ragged moustaches, dark-haired children, old people with wrinkled, leathery skin. Two men in heavy overcoats carrying an old woman on a seat made out of their joined hands, a ten-year-old carrying a two-year-old strapped to her back with a piece of cloth, a little dark-eyed boy with a blue woolen hat pulled down almost over his eyes; a woman with a baby held tight against her chest, partway under an open man's overcoat, pulling her way up with a walking stick.

You could see their breath like puffs of steam in the early morning air. The sun was just coming up, and they looked like they'd been walking most of the night, and expected to have to walk a long, long way yet. Every once in a while, they looked back over their shoulders like something was after them. They looked so tired and cold and hungry it made you ache to look at them.

The woman with the baby stopped near me and slumped down on a rock to sit and started to nurse the baby. It wouldn't take the nipple, and it didn't move and I knew it was dead, and I knew *she* knew it was dead, but she couldn't afford to let that be her reality until she got where she was going or she would just sit by the side of the path and cry until she died.

There was a drop near where the wall screen usually was, and heads kept coming up out of it, and turning into whole people as they staggered up out of some side track. I watched an old woman scramble up the last few feet on her hands and knees, and then she reached back down and grabbed a hand that was waving around trying to catch on to something and pulled an old man up after her. He had bandages across his eyes that were caked with blood and dirt. His hands were all cracked and blistered, and the woman's face was burned along one side. She stood up and pulled him up to his feet and they started to come toward me, grim-faced, exhausted.

They were all over, standing on some stones where the table usually seemed to be, sitting on a dirt ledge covered with stiff yellowish grass where the couches usually were, standing in front of me, taking a deep breath trying to get ready to go on.

I don't think they really looked at me, but I felt like all their eyes turned toward me, big dark eyes. It made me want to throw them the potato chips and go back in the kitchen and get everything else I could find for them to eat. They looked so hungry and cold. I wanted to tell them to rest, that I'd get them whatever they needed.

But they all turned away from me and looked back out over the valley. I could hear it too, the sound of helicopters, far off, but coming closer. I thought it must be rescuers. I thought, they'll drop food and medicine. Down the path, people were running, and then the people started rushing past me, and I thought they were heading for the top of the mountain where the supplies would be dropped. I wanted to turn and run with them, to help them. And when the helicopters came into sight, I started waving, like they could see me and not everybody else. I didn't even remember that for them, I wasn't even there at all.

I could see one coming straight toward me up the valley, getting bigger all the time, and I was waving and shouting and I kept waving and shouting even when they opened fire.

There was nothing I could do. Down in the valley, a helicopter dropped close to the ground and went along over the heads of people on the path so low it seemed to touch them, and out of the back of it, a yellowwhite cloud poured like smoke. I thought the helicopter was hit, but I saw people jumping off the path into the ravine when the cloud got even close to them and I knew it was gas.

The little girl came up out of the side track. She was scrambling up, and the little boy was slipping out of the wrapping that strapped him to her. She got to her feet and ran, the boy's hat fell off, his head was bobbing back and forth and his arms were flying out like he was trying to get his balance. And just before she got to me, the wrapping came loose completely and he fell off. I heard him scream and start to cry when he hit. The girl looked over her shoulder, back past her brother at the helicopters sweeping upward from the valley, and then she ran on past me without looking back again.

I wanted to run for the little boy and scoop him up, but the first of the helicopters popped up over the side track, and right under it, Aunt Zsa-Zsa walked in from the hall to the sauna and said, "Oh, you found the potato chips. Good." The cloud of poison gas started to sift down over her, and she looked around at the valley disappearing under the mist, and said, "Oh, your uncle's got his depth of field problem fixed."

Then she came over to me. I was crying and I didn't even know it. Big tears were rolling down my cheeks. The sound of the helicopter passing over was deafening, and she waited for it to pass, like it was a minor annoyance she was used to. "What are you crying for, dear?" She put a hand on my shoulder. "It's not real. It's just an image your Uncle Howard took off the TV news."

Uncle Howard came up through the other side of the image from his lab. He stopped and looked back across the valley. People poured past him, choking, blinded with tears and pain, staggering for an escape they'd never find. He had a huge smile on his face. "What do you think of *that?!*" he said.

"He thought it was real," Aunt Zsa-Zsa said. "Isn't it wonderful!"

"In five years," Uncle Howard said, "Every house in America will be like this."

I left that night. I didn't even leave a note. I feel real bad about that, even now. But there was nothing I could say. I didn't even know myself why I couldn't stay any more. Lester was right, I'm an ungrateful little bastard and always will be. But I've been out here on the streets a long time now, and even though it isn't quite five years, I think a lot of houses in America are just like Uncle Howard's already. ●

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR
SPLIT INFINITIVES

To be or to not be's the question for
Infinitives. To speak politely or
To flout the rule that cannot be
Broken with impunity,
Grammar's first law and holy writ:
Infinitives must not be split,
And never ask the reason why.
You may be thinking what if I
Were on a plane about to crash.
Surely it would not be rash
To try to safely parachute.
You would be wrong. The Institute
Of Proper Speech gives not a hoot
Whether you perish or you live—
And won't allow a split infinitive.

—Tom Disch

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

SOME PERSONAL PRONOUNS

You and I

If I were you, who would I be?
Not me, because I would be you.
I'd have your name and wear your clothes,
And if I wrote, I'd write your prose,
Which wouldn't be like me at all.
You want to talk? Give me a call.

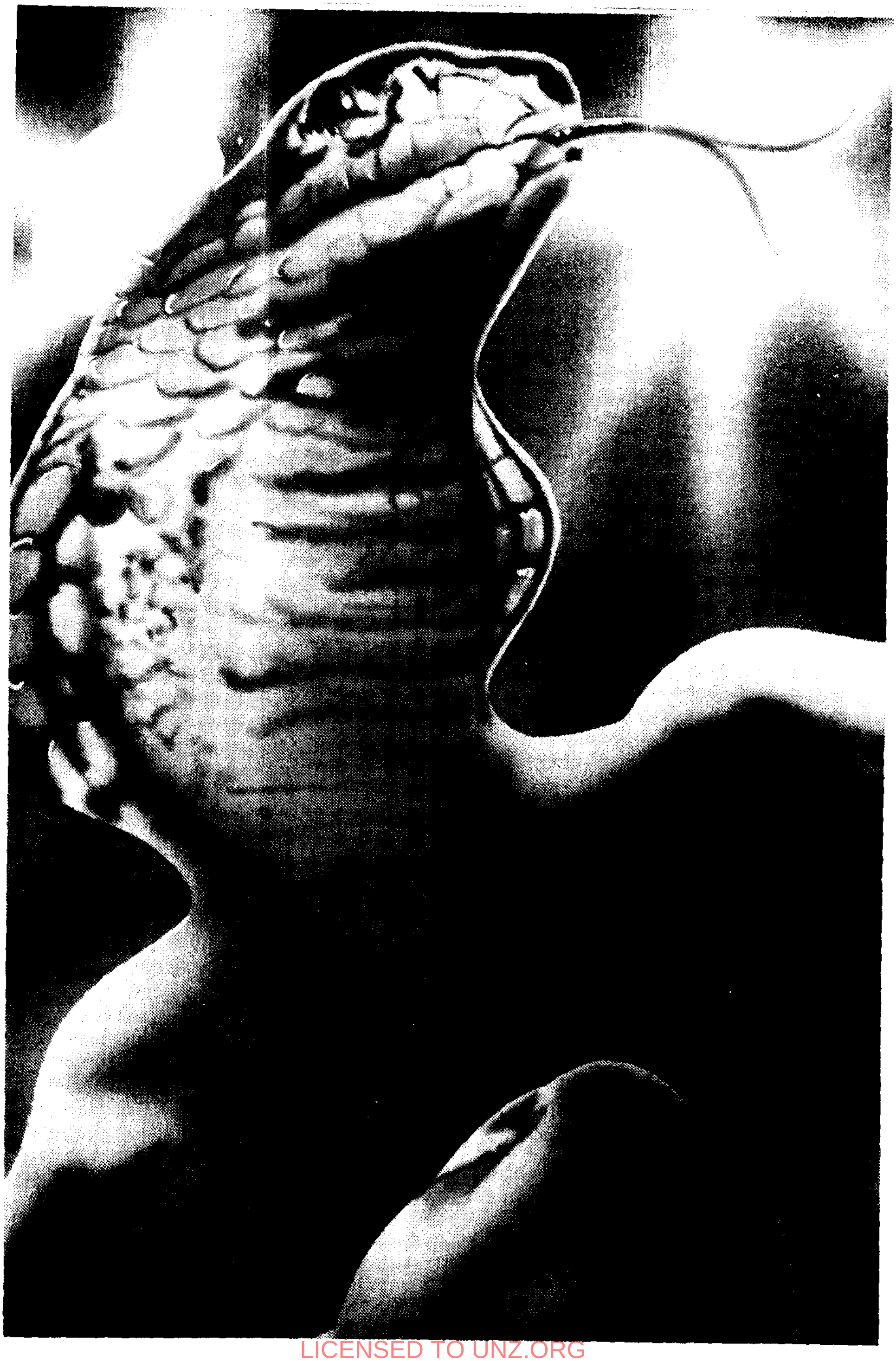
He, She, and It

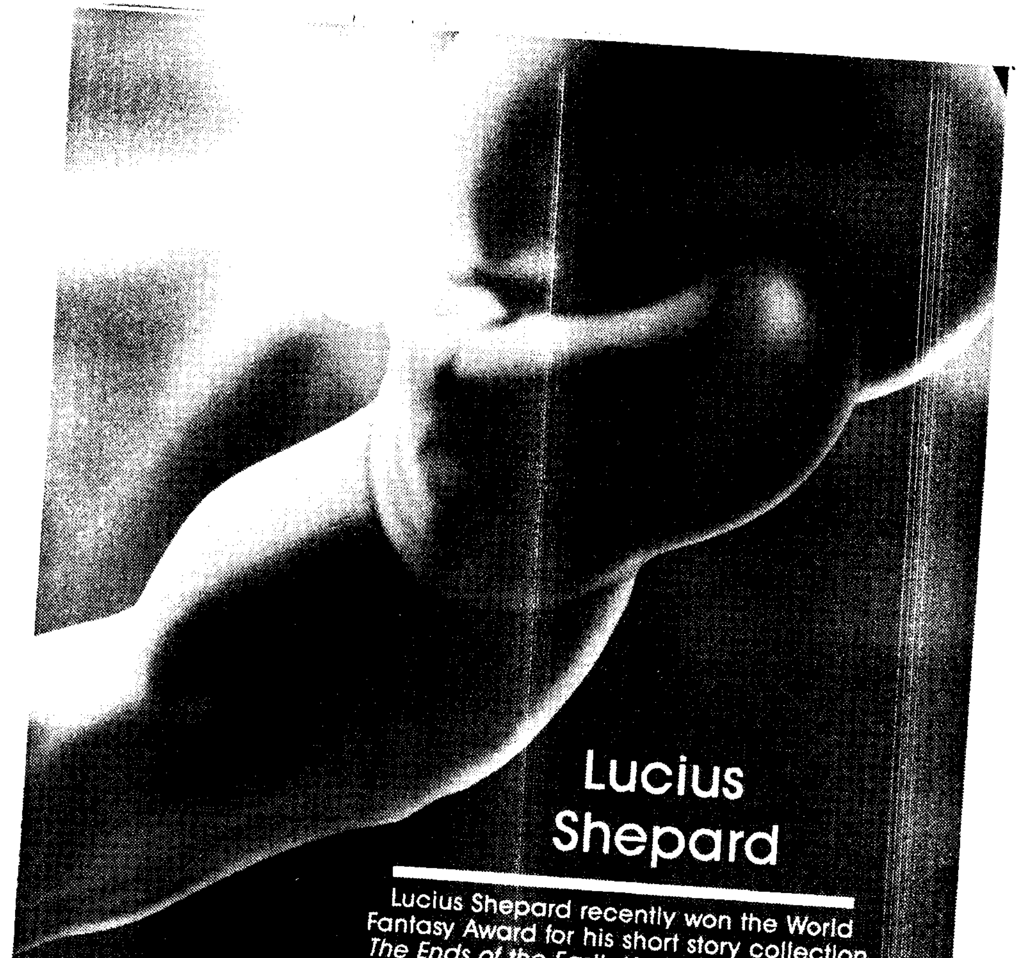
The verbs they take are all the same:
He is, she is, and it is, too,
Regardless of their sex or fame.
Would it were so for me and you.

Thou, Thee, and Thine

There was a time—it's long gone now—
When thee was you, and you were thou.
I've always been myself, a me,
But how fondly I remember thee!
The whole world now is yours and mine
That once, my love, was ours and thine.

—Tom Disch





Lucius Shepard

Lucius Shepard recently won the World Fantasy Award for his short story collection, *The Ends of the Earth* (Arkham House), and his lastest novel, *The Golden*, will be out from Bantam Books next summer. Mr. Shepard's complex and beautiful new story brilliantly evokes the . . .

BEAST OF THE HEARTLAND

art: Broeck Steadman

"Beast of the Heartland" originally appeared in *Playboy Magazine*. Copyright © 1992 by Lucius Shepard.

Mears has a dream the night after he fought the Alligator Man. The dream begins with the words "In the beginning was a dark little god with glowing red eyes . . ." and then there it stands, hovering in the blackness of Mears's hotel room, a twisted mandrake root of a god, evil and African, with limbs like twists of leaf tobacco and ember eyes. Even after it vanishes Mears can feel those eyes burning inside his head, merged into a single red pain that seems as if it will go on throbbing forever. He wonders if he should tell Leon about the pain—maybe he could give Mears something to ease it; but he figures this might be a bad idea. Leon would likely cut and run, not wanting to be held responsible should Mears keel over, and there Mears would be without a trainer, without anyone to coach him for the eye exams, without an accomplice in his blindness.

To distract himself, he lies back and thinks about the fight. He was doing pretty well until the ninth. Staying right on the Cuban's chest, mauling him in the corners, working the body. The Cuban didn't like it to the body. He was a honey-colored kid a couple of shades lighter than Mears, and he punched like a kid, punches that stung, but didn't take your heart like the punches of a man. Fast, though. Jesus, he was fast! As the fight passed into the middle rounds, as Mears tired, the Cuban began to slip away, to circle out of the haze of ringlight and vanish into the darkness at the corners of Mears's eyes, and Mears only saw the punches coming at the last second, the wet-looking red blobs of the gloves looping in over his guard. Then in the ninth a left he never saw drove him into the turnbuckle, and a flurry of shots under the ribs popped his mouthpiece halfway out, and another left to the temple made him clinch, pinning the Cuban's gloves against his sides.

In the clinch, that's when he caught sight of the Alligator Man. The Cuban pulled back his head, trying to wrench his right glove free, and the blurred oval of his face sharpened, resolved into features: blazing yellow eyes and pebbly skin and slit nostrils at the end of a long snout. Though used to such visions, hallucinations, whatever this was, Mears reacted in terror. He jolted the Alligator Man with an uppercut, he spun him, landed a clubbing right high on the head, another right, as if those punches were magic, as if their force and number were removing a curse, breaking a spell, the Alligator Man's face melted away, becoming a blurred brown oval once again. Mears's terror also grew blurred, his attack less furious, and the Cuban came back at him, throwing shots from every angle. He tried to slide off along the ropes, but his legs were gone, so he ducked his head, put his gloves up to block the shots, but they got through anyway. Then somebody's arms went around him, hemming him in against the ropes, and he smelled flowery cologne and heard a smooth baritone saying, "Take it easy, man! It's over!" He wanted to tell the ref he was okay, I mean it was cool to stop the fight, but he could have stood up through ten, the Cuban couldn't punch for shit. But he was too weak to say anything, and he just rested his head on the ref's shoulders, strings of drool hanging off his mouthpiece, cooling on his chin, and for the first time in a long while he heard the crowd screaming for the Cuban, the women's voices bright and crazy, piercing up from the male roar. Then Leon was there, Leon's astringent smell of Avitene and vaseline and Gel-Foam, and somebody shoved Mears down onto a stool, and Leon pressed the ice-cold bar of the Enswell against the lump over his eye, and the Cuban elbowed his way through the herd of commission officials and nobodies in the corner and said, "Man, you one tough motherfucker! You almos' kill me with them right hands," and Mears had the urge to tell him, You think I'm tough, wait'll you see what's coming, but instead, moved by the sudden, heady love that possesses you after you have pounded on a man for nine rounds and he has not fallen, Mears told him that one day soon he would be champion of the world.

Mears wonders if the bestial faces that materialize in the midst of his fights are related to the pain in his head. Maybe so, he thinks. Yet in his heart he believes they are something else. It could be that he has been granted the magical power to see beneath the surface of things. Or else they may be something his mind has created to compensate for his blindness, a kind of spiritual adrenaline that inspires him to fiercer effort, often to victory. Since his retinas became detached, he has slipped from the status of fringe contender to trial horse for young fighters on the way up, and his style has changed from one of evasive grace to that of a brawler, of someone who must keep in constant physical contact with his opponent; nevertheless, he has won twelve of seventeen fights with his handicap, and he owes much of his success to this symptom or gift or delusion. He knows most people would consider him a fool for continuing to fight, and he accepts this; but he does not consider himself a greater fool than most people; his is only a more dramatic kind of foolishness than the foolishness of loving a bad woman or stealing a car or speculating on gold futures or smoking cigarettes or taking steroids or eating wrong or involving yourself with the trillion other things that lead to damage and death.

As he lies in that darkened room, in the pall of his own darkness, he imagines attending a benefit held to raise money for his medical expenses after his secret has been disclosed. All the legends are there. Ali, Frazier, and Foreman are there, men who walk with the pride of a nation. Duran is there, Duran of the demonic fury, who TKO'ed Mears in 1979 back when he was a welterweight. The Hit Man is there, Thomas Hearns, sinister and rangy, with a cobralike jab that cut him so badly the flesh hung down into his eyes. And Hagler who knocked Mears out in his only title shot, Hagler the tigerish southpaw, he is there too. Mears ascends to the podium to offer thanks, and a reporter catches his arm and asks him, "What the hell went wrong, Bobby? What happened to you?" He thinks of all the things he could say in response. Bad managers, crooked promoters. I needed the money to pay alimony. Women stole from me. I forgot to duck. The classic answers. But there is one answer they've never heard, one that he's nourished for almost two years, that nourishes him.

"I traveled into the heartland," he tells the reporter, "and when I got done fighting the animals there, I came out blind."

The reporter looks puzzled, but Ali and Foreman, Frazier and Hagler, Duran and Hearns, they nod sagely, they understand. They realize Mears's answer is partly a pride thing, partly intuitive, a mystical summation of punches absorbed, hands lifted in victory, months of painful healing, hours of punishment in the gym, but mainly it is the recasting of a decision made long years before into a vow. They would not argue that their sport is brutally stupid, run by uncaring bastards to whom it is a business of dollars and blood, and that tragedies occur, that fighters are swindled and outright robbed; yet there is something about it they have needed, something they have chosen, whether foolishly or not, and so in the end, unlike the asbestos worker who bitterly decries the management that has lied to him and led him down a fatal path, the fighter feels no core bitterness, not even at himself for being a fool, for making such a dangerous choice in the folly of youth, because he has forsworn the illusion of wisdom. Mears is not without his regrets. Sometimes, indeed, he regrets almost everything. He regrets his blindness, his taste in women, his rotten luck at having been a middleweight during the age of Marvin Hagler. But he has never regretted boxing. He loves what he does, loves the gym rats, the old dozers with their half-remembered tales of Beau Jack and Henry Armstrong, the crafty trainers, the quiet cut men with their satchels full of swabs and chemicals. He loves how he has been in the ring, honorable and determined and brave. And now, nodding off in a cheap hotel room, ascending to a podium to address the legends of the game, to mutter a few halting words of thanks, he feels love returned in applause that has the sound of rushing water, a pure stream of affirmation that bears him away into the company of heroes and a restless sleep.

Three mornings later as Mears waits for Leon in the gym, he listens happily to the slapping of jump ropes, the grunt and thud of someone working the heavy bag, the jabber and pop of speed bags, fighters shouting encouragement, the sandpapery whisk of shoes on canvas, the meaty thump of fourteen-ounce sparring gloves. Pale winter light chutes through the high windows, like a Bethlehem star to Mears's eyes. The smell is a harsh perfume of antiseptic, resin, and sweat. Now and then somebody passes by, says, "Yo, Bobby, what's happenin'?" or "Look good the other night, man!" and he will hold out his hand to be slapped without glancing up, pretending that his diffidence is an expression of cool, not a pose designed to disguise his impaired vision. His body still aches from the Cuban's fast hands, but in a few weeks, a few days if necessary, he'll be ready to fight again.

He hears Leon rasping at someone, smells his cigar, then spots a dark interruption in the light. Not having to see Leon, he thinks, is one of the few virtues of being legally blind. Even under the best of circumstances, Leon is unsightly, a chocolate-colored blob of a man with jowls and yellow teeth and a belly that hangs over his belt. The waist of Mears's boxing trunks would not fit over one of his thighs. He is especially unsightly when he lies, which is often—the weakness that comes into his face, the darting of his popped eyes, the pink tip of the tongue sliming the gristly upper lip. He looks much better as blur in an onion-colored shirt and dark trousers.

"Got a fight for us, my man!" Leon drops onto a folding chair beside him, and the chair yields a metallic creak. "Mexican name Nazario. We gon' kick his fuckin' ass!"

This is the same thing Leon said about the Cuban, the same thing he says about every opponent; but on this occasion he may actually be sincere. "Guy's made for us," he continues. "Comes straight ahead. Good hook, but a nothin' right. No fancy bullshit." He claps Mears on the leg. "We need a **W** bad, man. We whup this guy in style, I kin get us a main event on ESPN next month in Wichita."

Mears is dubious. "Fightin' who?"

"Vederotta," says Leon, and hurries past the name to say the Nazario fight is in two weeks, "we kin be ready by then, cain't we, sure, we be ready, we gon' kill that mother!"

"That guy calls himself 'The Heat'? Guy everybody's been duckin'?"

"Wasn't for everybody duckin' him, I couldn't get us the fight. He's tough, I ain't gon' tell you no lie. He busts people up. But check it out, man. Our end's twenty grand. Like that, Bobby? Tuh-wenty thousand dollars."

"You shittin' me?"

"They fuckin' desperate. They cain't get nobody to fight the son of a bitch. And they need a tune-up for a title shot." Leon sucks on his cigar, trying to puff it alight. "It's your ass out there, man. I'll do what you tell me. But we get past Nazario, we show good against Vederotta—I mean give him a few strong rounds, don't just fold in one—guy swears he'll book us three more fights on ESPN cards. Maybe not the main event, but TV bouts. That'd make our year, man. Your end could work out to forty, forty-five."

"You get that in writin' 'bout the three more fights?"

"Pretty sure. Man's so damn desperate for somebody wif a decent chin, he probably throw in a weekend wif his wife."

"I don't want his damn wife, I want it in writin' 'bout the fights."

"You ain't seen his wife! That bitch got a wiggle take the kinks outta a couch spring." Delighted by his wit, Leon laughs; the laugh turns into a wet, racking cough.

"I'm gon' need you on this one," says Mears after the coughing has subsided. "None of this bullshit 'bout you runnin' 'round all over after dope and pussy while I'm bustin' my balls in the gym, and then showin' up when the bell rings. I'm gon' need you really workin'. You hear that, Leon?"

Leon's breath comes hard. "I hear you."

"Square business, man. You gotta write me a book on that Vederotta dude."

"I'll do my thing," says Leon, and wheezes. "You just take care of ol' Señor Nazario."

The deal concluded, Mears feels exposed, as if a vast, luminous eye —God's perhaps—is shining on him, revealing all his frailties. He sits up straight, holds his head very still, rubs his palms along the tops of his thighs, certain that everyone is watching. Leon's breath is hoarse and labored, like last breaths. It seems the light is beginning to tighten up around that sound, to congeal into something cold and hard and gray, like a piece of dirty ice in which they are all embedded. Mears thinks of Vederotta, the things he's heard. The one-round knockouts, the vicious beatings. He knows he's just booked himself a world of hurt. As if in resonance with that thought, his vision ripples and there is a twinge inside his head, a little flash of red. He grips the seat of the chair, prepares for worse. But worse does not come, and after a minute or so he begins to relax, thinking about the money, slipping back into the peace of morning in the gym, with the starred light shining from on high and the enthusiastic shouts of the young fighters and the slap of leather making a rhythm like a river slapping against a bank and the fat man who is not his friend beginning to breathe easier now beside him.

When Mears phones his ex-wife Amandla the next night, he sits on the edge of the bed and closes his eyes so he can see her clearly. She's wearing her blue robe, slim-hipped and light-skinned, almost like a Latin girl, but her features are fine and eloquently African, and her hair is kept short in the way of a girl from Brazzaville or Conakry. He remembers how good she looks in big gold hoop earrings and those silky prints that move all over her when she moves. He remembers so much sweetness, so much consolation and love. She simply had not been able to bear his pain, coming home with butterfly patches over his stitched eyes, pissing blood at midnight, having to heave himself up from a chair like an old man. It was a weakness in her, he thinks, yet he knows it was an equivalent weakness in him, that fighting is his crack, his heroin—he would not give it up for her.

She picks up on the fourth ring, and he says, "How you been, baby?" She hesitates a moment before saying, "Aw, Bobby, what you want?" But she says it softly, plaintively, so he'll know that though it's not a good thing to call, she's glad to hear his voice anyway.

"Nothin', baby," he says. " I don't want nothin'. I just called to tell you I'll be sendin' money soon. Few weeks, maybe."

"You don't have to. I'm makin' it all right."

"Don't tell me you can't use a little extra. You got responsibilities."

A faded laugh. "I hear that."

There is silence for a few beats; then Mears says, "How's your mama holdin' up?"

"Not so good. Half the time I don't think she knows who I am. She's gettin' so hard to deal with. She goes to wanderin' off sometimes, and I got to . . ." She breaks off, lets air hiss out between her teeth. "I'm sorry, Bobby. This ain't your trouble."

That stings him, but he does not respond directly to it. "Well, maybe I send you a little somethin', you can ease back from it."

"I don't want to short you."

"You ain't gon' be shortin' me, baby." He tells her about Nazario, the twenty thousand, but not about Vederotta.

"Twenty thousand!" she says. "They givin' you twenty thousand for fightin' a man you say's easy? That don't make sense."

"Ain't like I'm just off the farm. I still got a name."

"Yeah, but you. . . ."

"Don't worry about it," he says angrily, knowing that she's about to remind him he's on the downside. "I got it under control."

Another silence. He imagines he can hear her irritation in the static on the line.

"But I do worry," she says. "God help me, I still worry 'bout you after all this time."

"Ain't been that long. Three years is all."

She does not seem to have heard. "I still think about you up there under them lights gettin' pounded on. And now you offerin' me money you gon' earn for gettin' pounded on some more."

"Look here . . ." he begins.

"Blood money. That's what it is. It's blood money."

"Stop it," he says. "You stop that shit. It ain't no more blood money than any other wage. Money gets paid out, somebody always gettin' fucked over at the end of it. That's just what money is. But this here money, it ain't comin' 'cause of nothin' like that, not even 'cause some damn judge said I got to give it. It's from me to you, 'cause you need it, and I got it!"

He steers the conversation away from the topic of fighting, gets her talking about some of their old friends; he even manages to get her laughing when he tells her how the cops caught Sidney Bodden and some woman doing the creature in Sidney's car in the parking lot of the A&P. The way she laughs, she tips her head and tucks her chin down onto her shoulder and never opens her mouth, just makes these pleased, musical noises, like a shy little girl, and when she lifts her head, she looks so innocent and pretty he wants to kiss her, grazes the receiver with his lips, wishes it would melt and open and let him pour through to her end of the line. The power behind the wish hits his heart like a mainlined drug, and he knows she still loves him, he still loves her, this is all wrong, this long distance shit, and he can't stop himself from saying, "Baby, I want to see you again."

"No," she says.

It is such a terminal, door-slamming No, he can't come back with anything. His face is hot and numb, his arms and chest heavy as concrete, he feels the same bewildered, mule-stupid helplessness as he did when she told him she was leaving. He wonders if she's seeing somebody, but he promises himself he won't ask.

"I just can't, Bobby," she says.

"It's all right, baby," he says, his voice reduced to whisper. "It's all right. I got to be goin'."

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry. But I just can't."

"I'll be sending you somethin' real soon. You take care now."

"Bobby?"

He hangs up, an effort, and sits there turning to stone. Brooding thoughts glide through his head like slow black sails. After a while he lifts his arms as if in an embrace. He feels Amandla begin to take on shape and solidity within the circle of his arms; he puts his left hand spread-fingered between her shoulderblades and smooths the other along her flanks, following the arch of her back, the tight rounds of her ass, the columned thighs, and he presses his face against her belly, smelling her warmth, letting all the trouble and ache of the fight with the Cuban go out of him. All the weight of loss and sadness. His chest seems to fill with something clear and buoyant. Peace, he thinks, we are at peace. But then some sly, peripheral sense alerts him to the fact that he is a fool to rely on this sentimental illusion, and he drops his arms, feels her fading away like steam. He sits straight, hands on knees, and turns his head to the side, his expression rigid and contemptuous as it might be during a stare-down at the center of a boxing ring. Since the onset of his blindness, he has never been able to escape the fear that someone is spying on him, but lately he has begun to worry that they are not.

For once Leon has not lied. The fight with Nazario is a simple contest of wills and left hooks, and though the two men's hooks are comparable, Mears' will is by far the stronger. Only in the fourth round does he feel his control slipping, and then the face of the hooded serpent materializes where Nazario's face should be, and he pounds the serpent image with right leads until it vanishes. Early in the fifth round he bulls Nazario into a corner and following a sequence of twelve unanswered punches, the ref steps in and stops it.

Two hours after the fight Mears is sitting in the dimly lit bar on the bottom floor of his hotel, having a draft beer and a shot of Gentleman Jack, listening to Mariah Carey on the jukebox. The mirror is a black, rippling distance flocked by points of actinic light, a mysterious lake full of stars and no sign of his reflection, and the hooker beside him is wearing a dark something sewn all over with spangles that move over breasts and hips and thighs like the scattering of moonlight on choppy water. The bartender, when he's visible at all, is a cryptic shadow. Mears is banged up some, a small but nasty cut at his hairline from a headbutt, and a knot on his left cheekbone, which the hooker is making much of, touching it, saying, "That's terrible-lookin', honey. Just terrible! You inna accident or somepin'?" Mears tells her to mind her own damn business, and she says, "Who you think you is, you ain't my business? You better quit yo' dissin', causes I ain't takin' that kinda shit from nobody!"

He buys her another drink to mollify her and goes back to his interior concerns. Though the pain from the fight is minimal, his eyes are acting up and there is a feeling of dread imminence inside his head, an apprehension of a slight wrongness that he knows can bloom into a fiery red presence. He is trying, by maintaining a certain poise, to resist it.

The hooker leans against him. Her breasts are big and sloppy soft, and her perfume is cheap and alcohol-based, like flowered Listerine, but her waist is slender and firm, and despite her apparent toughness, he senses that she is very young, new to the life. This youthfulness, this barely hardened innocence, makes him think of Amandla.

"Don't you wan' go upstairs, baby?" she says, as her hand traces loops and circles along the inside of his thigh.

"We be there soon enough," he says gruffly. "We got all night."

"Whoo!" She pulls back from him. "I never seen a young man act so stern! 'Mind me of my daddy!" From her stagey tone, he realizes she is playing to the other patrons of the place, whom he cannot see, invisible as gods on their barstools. Then she is rubbing against him again, saying, "You gon' treat me like my daddy, honey? You gon' be *hard* on me?"

"Listen up," he says quietly, putting a hand on her arm. "Don't you be playin' these games. I'm payin' you good, so you just sit still and we'll have a coupla drinks and talk a little bit. When the time comes, we'll go upstairs. Can you deal with that?"

He feels resentment in the tension of her arm. "Okay, baby," she says with casual falsity. "What you wan' talk about?"

Mariah Carey is having a vision of love, her sinewy falsetto going high into a gospel frequency, and Mears asks the hooker if she likes the song.

She shrugs. "It's all right."

"You know the words?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sing it with me?"

"Say what?"

He starts to sing, and after a couple of seconds, the hooker joins in. Her voice is slight and sugary, but blends well with Mears's tenor. As they sing, her enthusiasm grows and Mears feels a frail connection forming between them. When the record ends she giggles, embarrassed, and says, "That was def, baby. You sing real good. You a musician?"

"Naw, just church stuff, y'know."

"Bobby Mears!" A man's voice brays out behind him, a hand falls heavily on his shoulder. "Goddamn, it *is* you! My fren', he saying, Ain't that Bobby Mears over there, and I said, Shit, what he be doin' in here?"

The man is huge, dark as a coalsack against the lesser darkness, and Mears has no clue to his identity.

"Yessir! Bobby 'The Magician' Mears! I'm your biggest fan, no shit! I seen you fight a dozen times. And I ain't talkin' TV. I mean in person. Man, this is great! Can I get you a drink? Lemme buy you one. Hey, buddy! Give us another round over here, okay?"

" 'Nother draft, 'nother shot of the Gentleman," says the bartender in a sing-song delivery as he pours; he picks up the hooker's glass and says with less flair, "Vodka and Coke."

"Sister," the man says to the hooker, "I don't know what Bobby's been tellin' you, but you settin' next to one of the greatest fighters ever lived."

The hooker says, "You a fighter, baby?" and Mears, who has been seething at this interruption, starts to say that it's time to leave, but the man talks through him.

"The boy was slick! I'm tellin' you! Slickest thing you ever seen with that jab of his. Like to kill Marvin Hagler. That ol' baldhead was one lucky nigger that night. Ain't it the truth, man?"

"Bullshit," Mears says.

"Man's jus' bein' modest."

"I ain't bein' modest. Hagler was hurtin' me from Round One, and all I's doin's tryin' to survive." Mears digs a roll of bills from his pocket, peels a twenty from the top—the twenties are always on top; then the tens, then the fives. "Anybody saw that fight and thinks Hagler was lucky don't know jack-shit! Hagler was the best, and it don't make me feel no better 'bout not bein' the best, you comin' round and bullshittin' me."

"Be cool, Bobby! Awright, man? Be cool."

The hooker caresses Mears' shoulders, his neck, and he feels the knots of muscle, like hard tumors. It would take a thousand left hooks to work that tension out, a thousand solid impacts to drain off the poisons of fear lodged there, and he experiences a powerful welling up of despair that seems connected to no memory or incident, no stimulus whatsoever, as if it is a kind of bottom emotion, one you never notice unless the light and the temperature and the noise level, all the conditions, are just right, but it's there all the time, the tarry stuff that floors your soul. He tells the man he's sorry for having lashed out at him. He's tired, he says, got shit on his mind.

"Hey," says the man, "hey, it's not a problem, okay?"

There follows a prickly silence during which Aaron Neville comes on the juke box. Mears goes away with the tune, with the singer's liquid shifts and drops, like the voice of a saxophone, and is annoyed once again when the man says, "Who you fightin' nex', Bobby? You got somethin' lined up?"

"Vederotta," Mears says.

" 'The Heat', man? You fightin' 'The Heat'? No shit! Hey, you better watch your ass with that white boy! I seen him fight Reggie Williams couple months back. Hit that man so hard, two his teeth come away stuck in the mouf'piece."

Mears slides the twenty across the bar and says, "Keep it", to the bartender.

"That's right," says the man with apparent relish. "That white boy ain't normal, you ax me. Somepin' unnatural 'bout him. He jus' be livin' to fuck you up, know what I mean? Got somethin' wrong in his head."

"Thanks for the drink," Mears says, standing.

"Anytime, Bobby, anytime," the man says as Mears lets the hooker lead him toward the stairs. "You take my advice, man. Watch yourself with that Vederotta. He gon' come at you hard, and you ain't no way slick as you used to be."

Cold blue neon winks on and off in the window of Mears's room, a vague nebular shine that might be radiating from a polar beacon or a ghostly police car, and as the hooker undresses, he lies on the bed in his shorts and watches the light. It's the only thing he sees, just that chilly blue in a black field, spreading across the surface of the glass like some undersea thing, shrinking and expanding, like the contractions of an icy blue heart. He has always been afraid before a fight, yet now he's afraid in a different way, or maybe it's not the fear that's different, maybe it's his resistance to it that's changed. Maybe he's weaker, wearier. He is so accustomed to suppressing fear, however, when he tries to examine it, it slithers away into the cracks of his soul and hides there, lurking, eyes aglow, waiting for its time. Vederotta. The man's name even sounds strong, like a foreign sin, an age-old curse.

"Ain't you wan' the lights on, honey?" asks the hooker. "I wan' you be able see what you doin'."

"I see you just fine," he says. "You come on lie down."

A siren curls into the distance; two car horns start to blow in an impatient rhythm, like brass animals angry at each other; smells of barbecue and gasoline drift in to overwhelm the odor of industrial cleaner.

Training, he thinks. Once he starts to train, he'll handle the fear. He'll pave it over with tons of sit-ups, miles of running, countless combinations, and by fight night there'll be just enough left to motivate him.

The hooker settles on the bed, lies on her side, leaning over him, her breasts spilling onto his chest and arm. He lifts one in his palm, squeezing its heft, and she makes a soft, pleased noise.

"Why you didn't tell me you famous?" she asks.

"I ain't famous."

"Yeah, but you was."

"What difference it make? Bein' famous ain't about nothin'."

She rolls her shoulders, making her breasts roll against him, and her hot, sweet scent seems to thicken. "Jus' nice to know is all." She runs a hand along his chest, his corded belly. "Ain't you somepin'," she says, and then: "How old're you, baby?"

"Thirty-two."

He expects her to say, Thirty-two! Damn, baby! I thought you was twenty-five, you lookin' go-ood! But all she does is give a little Mmm sound as if she's filing the fact away and goes on caressing him. By this he knows that the connection they were starting to make in the bar has held, and she's going to be herself with him, whoever she is, which is what he wants, not some play-acting bitch who will let him turn her into Amandla, because he is sick and tired of having that happen.

She helps him off with his shorts, brings him all the way hard with her hand, then touches his cock to her breasts, lets it butt and slide against her cheek, takes it in her mouth for just seconds, like into warm syrup, her tongue swirling, getting his hips to bridge up from the mattress, wise and playful in her moves, and finally she comes astride him and says, "I believe I'm ready for some of this, baby," her voice burred, and she reaches for him, puts him where she needs it, and then her whole dark, sweet weight swings down slick and hot around him, and his neck arches, his mouth strains open, and his head pushes back into the pillow, feeling as if he's dipped the back of his brain into a dark green pool, this ancient place with mossy stone temples beneath the water and strange carvings and spirits gliding in and out the columns, and when that moment passes he finds she's riding him slow and deep and easy, not talking hooker trash, but fucking him like a young girl, her breath shaky and musical, hands braced on the pillow by his head, and he slides his hands around to cup her ass, to her back, pressing down so that her breasts graze and nudge his chest, and it's all going so right he forgets to think how good it is and gives himself over to the arc of his feelings and the steady, sinuous beat of her heart-filled body.

Afterward there is something shy and delicate between them, something he knows won't survive for long, maybe not even until morning, and maybe it's all false, maybe they have only played a deeper game, but if so it's deep enough that the truth doesn't matter, and they are for now in that small room somewhere dark and green, the edge of that pool he dipped into for a second, a wood, sacred, with the calls of those strange metal beasts sounding in the distance from the desolate town, and a shadow is circling beneath the surface of the pool, it's something old, something unnatural, wrinkled, hard with evil, like a pale crocodile that's never been up into the light, but it's not an animal, not even a thought, it's just a name: Vederotta. He holds her tight, keeps two fingers pushed between her legs touching the heated damp of her, feeling her pulse there, still rapid and trilling, and he wants to know a little more about her, anything, just one thing, and when he whispers the only question he can think to ask she wriggles around, holding his two fingers in place, turns her face to his chest and says her name is Arlene.

Training is like religion to Mears, the litanies of sparring, the penances of one-arm push-ups, the long retreats of his morning runs, the monastic breakfasts at 4 AM, the vigils in the steam room during which he visualizes what will happen in the ring with the intensity of prayer, and as with a religion, he feels it simplifying him, paring him down, reducing his focus to single consuming pursuit. On this occasion, however, he allows himself to be distracted and twice sleeps with Arlene. At first she tries to act flighty and brittle as she did in the bar, but when they go upstairs that mask falls away, and it is good for them again. The next night she displays no pretense whatsoever. They fuck wildly like lovers who have been long separated, and just before dawn they wind up lying on their sides, still joined, hips still moving sporadically. Mears's head is jangled and full of anxious incoherencies. He's worried about how he will suffer for this later in the gym and concerned by what is happening with Arlene. It seems he is being given a last sweetness, a young girl not yet hardened beyond repair who has some honest affection for him, who perhaps sees in him a means of salvation, and this makes him think he is being prepared for something bad by God or whomever. Though he's been prepared for the worst for quite a while, now he wonders if the Vederotta fight will somehow prove to be worse than the worst, and frightened by this, he tells Arlene he can't see her again until after the fight. Being with her, he says, saps his strength and he needs all his strength for Vederotta. If she is the kind of woman who has hurt him in the past, he knows she will react badly, she will accuse him of trying to dump her, she will rave and screech and demand his attentions. And she does become angry, but when he explains that he is risking serious injury by losing his focus, her defensiveness—that's what has provoked her anger—subsides, and she pulls him atop her, draws up her knees and takes him deep, glueing him to her sticky thighs, and as the sky turns the color of tin and delivery traffic grumbles in the streets, and a great clanking and screech of metal comes from the docks, and garbage trucks groan and whine as they tip dumpsters into their maws like iron gods draining their goblets, she and Mears rock and thrust and grind, tightening their hold on one another, as the city seems to tighten around them, winching up its loose ends notch by notch in order to withstand the fierce pressures of the waking world.

That afternoon at the gym Leon takes Mears into the locker room and sits him down on a bench. He paces back and forth, emitting an exhaust of bitter cigar smoke, and tells Mears that the boxing commission will be no problem, the physical exam—like most commission physicals—is going to be a joke, no eye charts, nothing, just blood pressure and heart and basic shit like that. He paces some more, then says he's just finished watching films of Vederotta's last four fights.

"Ain't but one way to fight him," he says. "Smother his punches, grab him, hold him, frustrate the son of a bitch. Then when he get wild and come bullin' in, we throw uppercuts. Uppercuts all night long. That's our only shot. Unnerstan'?"

"I hear you."

"Man's strong." Leon sighs as he takes a seat on the bench opposite Mears. "Heavyweight strong. He gon' come at us from the bell and try to hurt us. He use his head, his elbows, whatever he gots. We cain't let him back us up. We back up on this son of a bitch, we goin' to sleep."

There is more, Mears can feel it, and he waits patiently, picking at the wrappings on his hands, listens to the slap and babble from the gym.

" 'Member that kid Ayala?" Leon asks. "Junior middleweight 'bout ten years ago. Mean fuckin' kid, wound up rapin' some schoolteacher in Jersey. Big puncher. This Vederotta 'mind me of him. He knock Jeff Terry down and then he kick him. He hold up Reggie Williams 'gainst the ropes when the man out on his feet so he kin hit him five, six times more." Leon pauses. "Maybe he's too strong. Maybe we should pull out of this deal. What you think?"

Mears realizes that Leon is mainly afraid Vederotta will knock him into retirement, that his cut of the twenty thousand will not compensate for a permanent loss of income; but the fact that Leon has asked what he thinks, that's new, that's a real surprise, and he suspects that deep within that gross bulk the pilot light of Leon's moral self, long extinguished, has been relit, and he is experiencing a flicker of concern for Mears's well-being. Recognizing this, Mears is, for reasons he cannot fathom, less afraid.

"Ain't you listenin', man? I axed what you think."

"Got to have that money," Mears says.

Leon sucks on his cigar, spits. "I don't know 'bout this," he says, real doubt in his voice, real worry. "I just don't know."

Mears thinks about Leon, all the years, the lies, the petty betrayals and pragmatic loyalty, the confusion that Leon must be experiencing to be troubled by emotion at this stage of the relationship. He tries to picture who Leon is and conjures the image of something bloated and mottled washed up on a beach, something that would have been content to float and dream in the deep blue-green light, chewing on kelp, but now will have to heave itself erect and lumber unsightly through the bright, terrible days without solace or satisfaction. He puts a hand on the man's soft, sweaty back, feels the sick throb of his heart. "I know you don't," he says. "But it's all right."

The first time he meets Vederotta, it's the morning of the fight, at the weigh-in. Just as he's stepping off the scale, he is startled to spot him standing a few feet away, a pale, vaguely human shape cut in the middle by a wide band of black, the trunks. And a face. That's the startling thing, the thing that causes Mears to shift quickly away. It's the sort of face that appears when a fight is going badly, when he needs more fear in order to keep going, but it's never happened so early, before the fight even begins. And this one is different from the rest. Not a comic book image slapped on to a human mold, it seems fitted just below the surface of the skin, of the false human face, rippling like something seen through a thin film of water. It's coal black, with sculpted cheeks and a flattened bump of a nose and a slit mouth and hooded eyes, an inner mask of black lusterless metal; from its eyes and mouth leaks a crumbling red glow, so radiant it blurs the definition of the features. Mears recognizes it for the face of his secret pain, and he can only stare at it. Intense heat seems to be coming off the man's body. Heat, and an odd vibration. Then Vederotta smiles, the slit opening wider to show the furnace glow within, and says in a dull, stuporous voice, a voice like ashes, "You don't look so good, man. Try and stay alive 'til tonight, will ya?" His handlers laugh, and Leon curses them, but Mears, suddenly spiked with terror, can find no words, no solidity within himself upon which to base a casual response, and he lashes out at that evil, glowing face with a right hand, which Vederotta slips, and then everyone, handlers, officials, the press, are surging back and forth, pulling the two fighters apart, and as Leon hustles Mears away, saying, "Fuck's wrong wif you, man? You crazy?" he hears Vederotta shouting at him, more bellowing than shouting, no words, nothing intelligible, just the raving of a black beast.

Half an hour before the fight is scheduled to start, Mears is lying on a training table in the dressing room, alone, his wrapped hands folded on his belly. From the arena come intermittent announcements over the PA, the crowd booing one of the preliminary bouts, and some men are talking loudly outside his door. Mears scarcely registers any of this. He's trying to purge himself of fear, but is not having much success. He believes his peculiar visual trick has revealed one of God's great killers, a supernatural being in the guise of a man, and that tonight the red seed of pain in his head will bloom and he will die. Nothing, no determined avowal, no life-affirming hope, will diminish that belief. He could back out of the fight, he could fake an injury of some sort, and he considers this possibility; but something—and it's not just pride—is pulling him onward. No matter whether or not that face he saw is real, there's something inhuman about Vederotta, something evil and implacable. And stupid. Some slowness natural to sharks and demons. Maybe he's not a fate, a supernatural creature; maybe he's only malformed, twisted in spirit. But Mears can't accept that. He senses Vederotta's wrongness the way he would a change in the weather, not merely because of the mask, but from a wealth of subtle yet undeniable clues. Standing next to him was like standing next to an overheated engine, one on the verge of exploding, shaking, shimmying, alive with vibration.

All these months of imagining beasts in the ring, and now he's finally come up against a *real* one. Maybe the only real one there is. The one he always knew was waiting. Could be, he thinks, it's just his time, and that's what is pulling him toward the ring. It's his time, and he has to confront it. Then it strikes him that there may be another reason. It's as if he's been in training, sparring with lesser beasts, Alligator Man, The Fang, Snakeman, and the rest, in order to prepare for this bout, and what if there's some *purpose* to his sacrifice, what if he's supposed to do something out there tonight *aside* from dying? He remembers the stories about knights and dragons from his childhood, and he wonders if that's what this is all about, if he's been chosen, if Vederotta's some kind of dragon. But those knights, they were anointed, they knew what they were up against, knew the dragon's name, its history, knew the nature of the beast. He, on the other hand, knows almost nothing about Vederotta, and he certainly does not recall being anointed. And yet, he thinks, maybe this is because the times are different, maybe the age-old conflicts are still being waged, though reduced in importance, because there's so much evil loose in the world nowadays, battles like this are no big deal, they happen all the time and nobody notices except the participants, and instead of glory and a legend made up about you, you just earn another **W** or an **L** on your record.

Lying there, he realizes he's already positioned for the coffin, posed for eternity, and that recognition makes him roll up to his feet and begin his shadowboxing, working up a sweat. His sweat stinks of anxiety, but the effort tempers the morbidity of his thoughts.

A tremendous billow of applause issues from the arena, and not long thereafter Leon pops in the door and says, "Quick knockout, man. We on in five." Then it goes very fast. The shuffling, bobbing walk along the aisle, through the Wichita crowd, hearing shouted curses, focusing on that vast, dim tent of white light that hangs down over the ring. Climbing through the ropes, stepping into the resin box, getting his gloves checked a final time. It's all happening too quickly. He's being torn away from important details. Strands of tactics, sustaining memories, they're being burned off him. He does not feel prepared. His belly knots, and he wants to puke. He needs to see where he is, exactly where, not just this stretch of blue canvas that ripples like shallow water and the warped circles of lights suspended in blackness like an oddly geometric grouping of suns seen from outer space. The heat of those lights, along with the violent, murmurous heat of the crowd, it's sapping—it should be as bright as day in the ring, like noon on a tropic beach, and not this murky twilight reeking of vaseline and concession food and fear. He keeps working, shaking his shoulders, testing the canvas with gliding footwork, jabbing and hooking, yet all the while he's hoping the ring will collapse or Vederotta will slip and sprain something, a power failure, anything to spare him. But when the announcer brays his name, his record and weight over the mike, as if by reflex he grows calm and submits to fate and listens to the mixture of boos and desultory clapping that follows.

"His opponent," the announcer continues, "is wearing black trunks with a red stripe! He weighs in tonight at a lean and mean one hundred and fifty-nine and one-half pounds! He's undefeated, currently ranked Number One by both the WBC and WBA, with twenty-four wins, twenty-three by knockowwwt! Let's have a great big prairie welcome for Wichita's favorite son, Toneee! 'The Heat'! Ve-de-rot-taaaaa! Vederotta!"

Vederotta dances forward into the roar that celebrates him, arms lifted above his head, his back to Mears; then he turns, and as Leon and the cut man escort Mears to the center of the ring for the instructions, he sees that menacing face again. Those glowing eyes.

"When I say 'break,' " the ref is saying, "I wantcha break clean. 'Case of a knockdown, go to a neutral corner and stay there 'til I tell ya to come out. Any questions?"

One of Vederotta's handlers puts in his mouthpiece, a piece of opaque plastic that mutes the fiery glow, makes it look liquid and obscene; gassy red light steams from beneath the black metal hulls that shade his eyes.

"Okay," says the ref. "Let's get it on!"

Vederotta holds out his gloves and says something through his mouthpiece. Mears won't touch gloves with him, frightened of what this acquiesence might imply. Instead, he shoves him hard, and once again the handlers have to intervene. Screams of outrage from the crowd lacerate the air, and the ref admonishes him, saying, "Gimme a clean fight, Bobby, or I'll disqualify ya." But Mears is listening to Vederotta shouting, fierce, garbled noises such as a lion might make with his mouth full of meat.

Leon hustles him back to the corner, puts in his mouthpiece and slips out through the ropes, saying, "Uppercuts, man! Keep throwin' them uppercuts!" Then he's alone, that strangely attentuated moment between the instructions and the bell, longer than usual tonight because the TV cameraman standing on the ring apron is having problems. Mears rolls his head, working the kinks out, shaking his arms to get them loose, and pictures himself as he must look from the cheap seats, a tiny dark figure buried inside a white pyramid. The image of Amandla comes into his head. She, too, is tiny. A doll in a blue robe, like a madonna, she has that kind of power, a sweet, gentle idea, nothing more. And there's Arlene, whom he has never seen, of whom he knows next to nothing, African and voluptuous and mysterious, like those big-breasted ebony statues they sell in the import stores. And Leon hunkered down at the corner of the ring, sweaty already, breath thick and quavery, peering with his popped eyes. Triangulated by them, the only three people who have any force in his life, Mears feels steadier, less afraid, and when he glances across the ring and finds that black death's head glaring at him, he is struck by something—he can *see* Vederotta. Since his eyes went bad, he's been unable to see his opponent until the man closes on him, and for that reason he circles tentatively at the beginning of each round, waiting for a figure to materialize from the murk, backing, letting them come to him. Vederotta must know this, must have seen that tendency on film, and Mears thinks it might be possible to trick him, to start out circling and then surprise him with a quick attack. He turns, wanting to consult Leon, not sure this would be wise, but the bell sounds, clear and shocking, sending him forward as inexorably as a toy set in motion by a spark.

Less than ten seconds into the fight, goaded by fear and hope in equal measure, Mears feints a sidestep, plants his back foot and lunges forward behind a right lead that catches Vederotta solidly above the left eye, driving him into the ropes. Mears follows with a jab and two more rights before Vederotta backs him up with a wild flurry, and he sees that Vederotta has been cut. The cut is on the top of the eyelid, not big but in a bad place, difficult to treat. It shows as a fuming red slit in that black mask, like molten lava cracking open the side of a scorched hill. Vederotta rubs at the eye, holds up his glove to check for blood, then hurls himself at Mears, taking another right on the way in but managing to land two stunning shots under the ribs that nearly cave him in. From then on it's all downhill for Mears. Nobody, not Hagler or Hearns or Duran, has ever hit him with such terrible punches. His face is numb from Vederotta's battering jab, and he thinks one of his back teeth may have been cracked. But the body shots are the worst. Their impact is the sort you might receive in a car crash, when the steering wheel or the dash slams into you. They sound like football tackles, they dredge up harsh groans as they sink deep into his sides, and he thinks he can feel Vederotta's fingers, his talons, groping inside the gloves, probing for his organs. With less than a minute to go in the round, a right hand to the heart drops him onto one knee. It takes him until the count of five to regain his breath, and he's up at seven, wobbly, dazed by the ache spreading across his chest. As Vederotta comes in, Mears wraps his arms about his waist, and they go lurching about the ring, faces inches apart, Vederotta's arm barred under his throat, trying to push him off. Vederotta spews words in a goblin language, wet, gnashing sounds. His smell is strange and coppery. He sprays fiery brimstone breath into Mears's face, acid spittle, the crack on his eyelid leaking a thin track of red phosphorous down a black cheek. When the ref finally manages to separate them, he tells Mears he's going to deduct a point if he keeps on holding. Mears nods, grateful for the extra few seconds rest, more grateful when he hears the bell.

Leon squirts water into Mears's mouth, tells him to rinse and spit. "You cut him," he says excitedly. "You cut the fucker!"

"I know," Mears says. "I can see him."

Leon, busy with the Enswell, refrains from comment, restrained by the presence of the cut man. "Left eye," he says, ignoring what Mears has told him. "Throw that right. Rights and uppercuts. All night long. That's a bad cut, huh, Eddie?"

"Could be a winner," the cut man says, "we keep chippin' on it."

Leon smears vaseline on Mears's face. "How you holdin' up?"

"He's hurtin' me. Everything he throws, he's hurtin' me." He pauses, and then, wanting to validate what he feels about Vederotta: "Somethin' ain't right about this guy, y'know. Nobody his size got a right to be *that* strong."

Leon tells him don't worry how strong the man is, go ahead and grab, let the ref deduct the fucking points, just hang in there and work the right. The crowd is buzzing, rumorous, and from this Mears suspects that he may really have Vederotta in some trouble, but he's still afraid, more afraid than ever now he has felt Vederotta's power. And as the second round begins, he realizes he's the one in trouble. The cut has turned Vederotta cautious. Instead of brawling, he circles Mears, keeping his distance, popping his jab, throwing an occasional combination, wearing his opponent down inch by inch, a pale, indefinite monster, his face sheathed in black metal, eyes burning like red suns at midnight. Each time Mears slips a jab and gets inside to throw his shots or grab, the price is high—hooks to the liver and heart, rights to the side of the neck, the hinge of the jaw. His face is lumping up. Near the end of the round a ferocious straight right to the temple blinds him utterly in the left eye for several seconds. Vederotta is talking to him, and though Mears can't understand what he's saying, he can tell by the tone, the measured pace of Vederotta's delivery, that this is not the usual dissing that goes on in the ring, the words are deep threats, threats to his *soul*, incantations, they invoke a power that weakens him further. When the bell sounds he sinks onto his stool, legs trembling, heartbeat ragged. Exotic eye trash floats in front of him. His head's full of hot poison, aching and unclear, but oddly enough, that little special pain of his has dissipated, chased away by the same straight right that caused his temporary blackout.

The doctor pokes his head into the desperate bustle of the corner and asks him where he is, how he's doing. Mears says, "Wichita," and "Okay." When the ref asks him if he wants to continue, he's surprised to hear himself say, "Yeah," because he's been doing little other than wondering if it would be all right to quit. Must be some good reason, he thinks, or else you're one dumb son of a bitch. That makes him laugh.

"Fuck you doin' laughin'?" Leon says. "We ain't havin' that much fun out there! Work on that cut! You ain't done diddley to that cut!"

Mears just shakes his head, too drained to respond.

The first minute of the third round is one of the most agonizing times of Mears's life. Vederotta continues his cautious approach, but he's throwing heavier shots now, headhunting, and Mears can do nothing other than walk forward and absorb them. He is rocked a dozen times, sent reeling. An uppercut jams the mouthpiece edge-on into his gums, and his mouth fills with blood. A hook to the ear leaves him rubber-legged. Two rights send spears of white light into his left eye, and the tissue around the eye swells, reducing his vision to a slit. A low blow smashes the edge of his cup, drives it sideways against his testicles, causing a pain that brings bile into his throat. But Vederotta does not follow up. After each assault he steps back to admire his work. It's clear he's prolonging things, trying to inflict maximum damage before the finish. Mears peers between his gloves at the beast stalking him, and wonders when that little red-eyed beast inside his head will start to twitch and burn. He's surprised it hasn't already, he's taken so many shots.

When the ref steps in after a series of jabs, Mears thinks he's stopping the fight, but it's only a matter of some tape unraveling from the wrist of his left glove. The ref leads him into the corner to let Leon retape it. He's so unsteady, he has to grip the ropes for balance, and glancing over his shoulder, he sees Vederotta spit his mouthpiece into his glove, which he holds up like a huge red paw. He expects Vederotta to say something, but all Vederotta does is let out a maniacal shout; then he re-inserts the mouthpiece into that glowing red maw and stares at Mears, shaking his black and crimson head slowly back and forth the way a bear does before he charges, telling him—Mears realizes—that this is it, there's not going to be a fourth round. But Mears is too wasted to be further intimidated, his fear has bottomed out, and as Leon fumbles with the tape, giving him a little more rest, his pride is called forth, and he senses again just how stupid Vederotta is, bone-stupid, dog-stupid, maybe just stupid and overconfident enough to fall into the simplest of traps. No matter what happens to him, Mears thinks, maybe he can do something to make Vederotta remember this night.

The ref waves them together, and Mears sucks it up, banishes his pain into a place where he can forget about it for a while, and shuffles forward, presenting a picture of reluctance and tentativeness, and when Vederotta connects with a jab, then a right that Mears halfway picks off with his glove, he pretends to be sorely afflicted and staggers back against the ropes. Vederotta's in no hurry. He ambles toward him, dipping his left shoulder, so sure of himself he's not even trying to disguise his punches, he's going to come with the left hook under, he's going to hurt Mears some more before he whacks him out. Mears peeks between his gloves, elbows tight to his sides, knowing he's got this one chance, this one moment, waiting, waiting, the crowd's roar like a jet engine around him, the vicious, smirking beast planting himself, his shoulder dipping lower yet, his head dropping down and forward as he cocks the left, and it's then, right at that precise instant, when Vederotta is completely exposed, that Mears explodes from his defensive posture and throws the uppercut, aiming not at the chin or the nose, but at that red slit on the black eyelid. He lands the shot clean, feels the impact in his shoulder, and above the crowd noise he hears Vederotta shriek like a woman, sees him stumble off into the corner, facing the crowd, his head lowered, glove held to the damaged eye. Mears follows, spins him about and throws another shot that knocks Vederotta's glove aside, rips at the eye. The slit, it's torn open now, become an inch-long gash, and that steaming, luminous red shit is flowing into the eye, over the dull black cheek and jaw, dripping onto his belly and trunks. Mears pops a jab, a right, another jab, not hard punches—they don't have to be hard, just accurate—splitting Vederotta's guard, each landing on the gash, slicing the eyelid almost its entire length. Then the ref's arms wrap around him from behind and haul him back, throwing him into ring center, where he stands, confused by this sudden cessation of violence, by this solitude imposed upon him after all that brutal intimacy, as the doctor is called in to look at Vederotta's eye. He feels light and unreal, as if he's been shunted into a place where gravity is weaker and thought has no emotional value. The crowd has gone quiet, and he hears the voice of Vederotta's manager raised in objection above the babbling in the corner. Then a second voice shouting the manager down, saying, "I can see the bone, Mick! I can see the goddamn bone!" And then—this is the most confusing thing of all—the ref is lifting his arm, and the announcer is declaring, without enthusiasm, to a response of mostly silence and some scattered boos, that ". . . the referee stops the contest at a minute fifty-six seconds of the third round. Your winner by TKO, Bobby . . . 'The Magician' . . . Mears!"

Mears's pain has returned, the TV people want to drag him off for an interview, Leon is there hugging him, saying, "We kicked his ass, man! We fuckin' kicked his ass!" and there are others, the promoter, the nobodies, trying to congratulate him, but he pushes them aside, shoulders his way to Vederotta's corner. He has to see him, to understand something, because this is not how things were supposed to play. Vederotta is sitting on his stool, someone smearing his cut with Avitene. His face is still visible, still that of the beast. Those glowing red eyes stare up at Mears, connect with the eye of pain in his head, and he wants there to be a transfer of knowledge, to learn that one day soon that pain will open wide and he will fall the way a fighter falls after one punch too many, disjointed, graceless, gone from the body. But no such transfer occurs, and he begins to suspect that something is not wrong, or rather that what's wrong is not what he suspected.

There's one thing he thinks he knows, however, looking at Vederotta, and while the handlers stand silently, respectfully, by, acknowledging his place in this ritual, he says, "You a hell of a fighter, man."

Vederotta says nothing, staring with unwavering, animal hostility at Mears. In defeat he seems more powerful and inhuman than ever, sullen and potent, heavy as death, the fires burning in that black face revealing their true depths, red twisting roots that reach down to a bedrock far below the world.

"I know you," Mears says. "I know what you are."

Vederotta's eyes narrow, his gloves twitch at his sides. He shakes off the man swabbing at his cut, his glowing stare a high beam of repressed fury, and Mears *knows*, he really *does* know at last that this is no ordinary creature of the heartland but a black principle made flesh, sent from God knows where to rend and tear and defile, and *he* has defeated it, ended its reign of terror. For an instant the knowledge burns inside him like some kind of Jesus thing, like redemption and everlasting glory, and he feels strong and certain and perfected in his craft and purpose.

"You were on your way," he goes on, "you coulda had the belt. But that eye's all tore up now. It never gon' be the same. Every fight they gon' be whacking at it, splittin' it open." One of the handlers tries to push him away, but he holds his ground. "You ain't gon' be fuckin' over nobody no more, so you might as well hang 'em up. You might as well go back to wherever it is you come from."

And as he turns and walks away, as the TV people surround him, saying, "Here's the winner, Bobby Mears . . ." and he wonders what exactly it is he's won, he can't figure it out, because there's no grail like in the old days, no treasure . . . it's then he hears a sound behind him, a gush of raw noise in which frustration and rage are commingled, both dirge and challenge, denial and lament, the final roaring of the beast.

Two weeks after the fight, what happened doesn't seem real anymore, and though he knows in his heart that it *was*, though he knows that he had played a part, however small, in some cosmic design or plan, though he remembers the truth he saw clearly in victory, the beast helpless on his stool, injured beyond repair, now the truth is an empty power, only a memory, like a story someone once told him about a knight and a dragon, and he's sitting in the hotel bar with Arlene, staring into that infinite dark mirror, feeling lost, undefined, sickly, like there's a cloud between him and the light that shines him into being, because he's not sure when he's going to fight again, maybe never, he's so busted up from Vederotta. His eyes, especially, seem worse, prone to dazzling white spots and blackouts, yet the pain deep in his head has subsided, and he thinks that the pain may have only been something to do with his eyes, and now that they're fading, it's fading too, and what will he do if that's the case? Leon has been working with this new lightweight, a real prospect, and he hasn't been returning Mears's calls, and when the bartender switches on the TV and a rapper's voice begins to blurt out his simple, aggressive rhymes, Mears gets angry, thoughts like hot gnats swarming around that old reeking nightmare shape in his head, that thing that may never have existed, and he pictures a talking skull on the TV shelf, with a stuffed raven and a coiled snake beside it. He drops a twenty on the counter and tells Arlene he wants to take a walk, a disruption of their usual routine of a few drinks then upstairs. It bewilders her, but she says, " 'kay, baby," and off they go into the streets, where Christmas lights are gleaming against the black velour illusion of night like green and red galaxies, as if he's just stepped into an incredible distance hung here and there with plastic angels filled with radiance, and the indistinct glows of department store windows are mystic experiences and the headlights of cars are comets with streaky tails. And people, lots of people brushing past, dark and shiny as beetles, scuttling along in all this holy immensity, chattering their bright gibberish, hustling toward mysterious crossroads where they stop and freeze into silhouettes against the streams of light, and Mears, who is walking very fast, because walking is dragging something out of him, some old unpurged weight of emotion, he's dismayed by their stopping, it goes contrary to the flow he wants to become part of, and he bursts through a group of shadows assembled like pilgrims by a burning river, and steps out, out and down, he's forgotten the curb, and staggers forward into the traffic, into squealing brakes and shouts, where he waits for a collision he envisions as swift and ultimately stunning, luscious in its finality, like the fatal punch Vederotta should have thrown. Yet it never comes. Then Arlene, who has clattered up, unsteady on her high heels, hauls him back onto the sidewalk, saying, "You tryin' to kill yo'self, fool?" And Mears, truly lost now, truly bereft of understanding, either of what he has done or why he's done it, stands mute and tries to find her face, wishes he could put a face on her, not a mask, just a face that would *be* her, but she's nowhere to be found, she's only perfume, heat, a sense of presence. He knows she's looking at him, though. He can feel it.

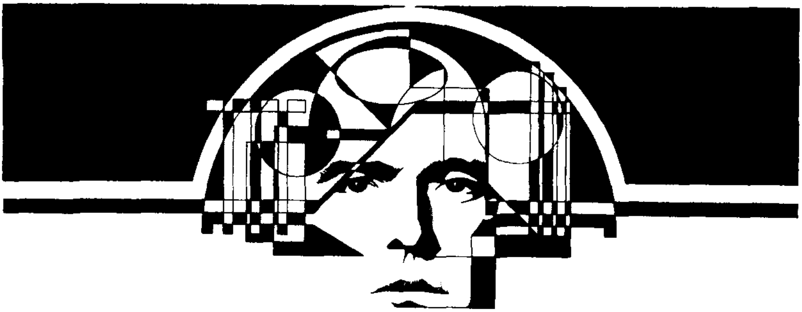
"You sick, Bobby?" she asks. "Aint' you gon' tell me what's wrong?"

How can he tell her that what's wrong is he's afraid he's *not* dying, that he'll live and go blind? How can that make any sense to her? And what does it say about how great a fool he's been? He's clear on nothing apart from that, the size of his folly.

"C'mon," Arlene says with exasperation, taking his arm. "We goin' to my place, and I'm gon' cook you some dinner. Then you can tell me what's been bitin' yo' ass."

He lets her steer him along. There's really no choice. He's too dazed to make decisions. Too worried. It's funny, he thinks, or maybe funny's not the word, maybe it's sad that what's beginning to worry him is exactly the opposite of what was troubling him a few seconds before. What if she proves to be someone who'll stand by him no matter how bad things get, what if the pain in his head hasn't gone away, it's just dormant, and instead of viewing death as a solution, one he feared but came to rely on, he now comes to view it as something miserable and dread? The darkness ahead will be tricky to negotiate, and the simple trials of what he's already starting to characterize as his old life seem, despite blood and attrition, unattainably desireable. But no good thing can arise from such futile longing, he realizes. Loving Amandla has taught him that.

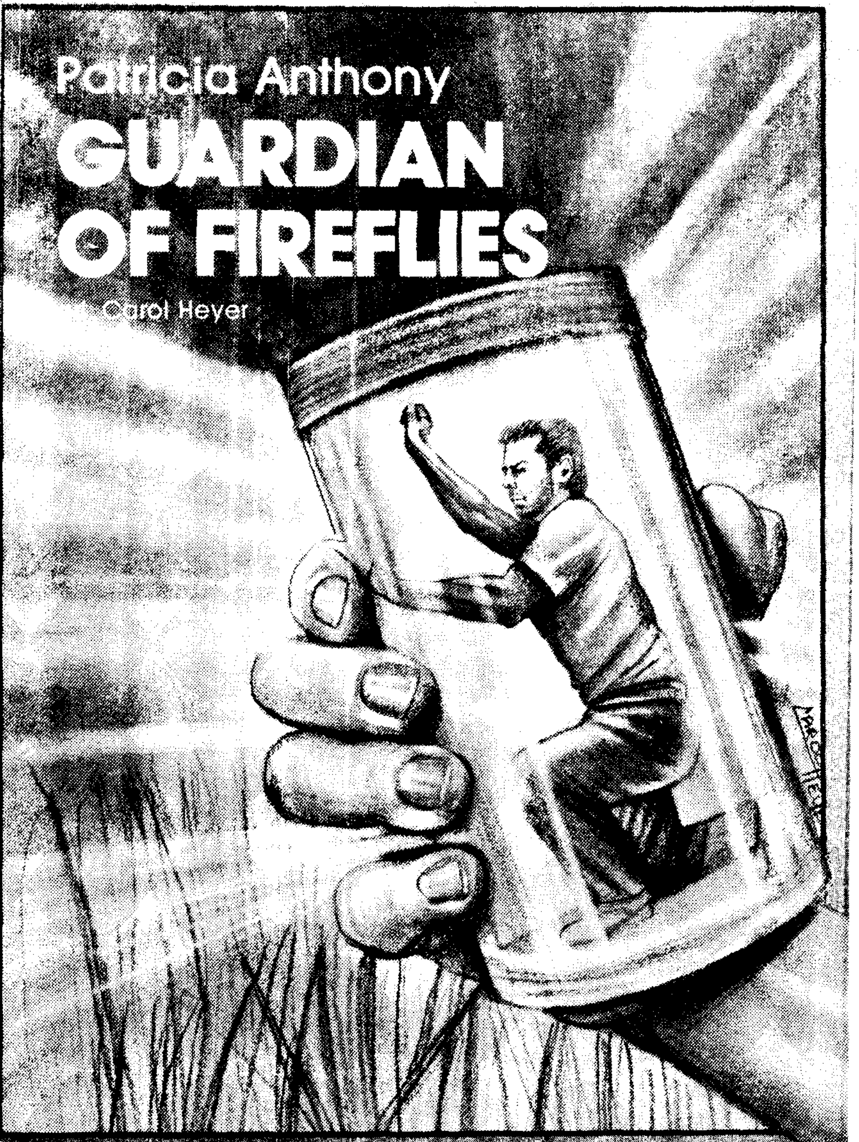
Between two department stores, two great, diffuse masses of white light, there's an alley, a doorway, a dark interval of some sort, and as they pass, Mears draws Arlene into it, finds a place to lean and pulls her tightly to him, needing a moment to get his bearings. The blackness of the street and sky is so uniform, it looks as if you could walk a black curve up among the blinking red and green lights, and as Arlene's breasts flatten against him, as he lets go a held breath, he feels like he is going high, like it feels when the man in the tuxedo tells you that you've won and all the pain is washed away by perfect exhilaration and sweet relief. Then, suddenly, as if jolted forward by the sound of the bell, he steps out into the crowds, becoming part of them, with them, like them, just another fool with short money and bad health and God knows what kind of woman trouble, someone who has won great battles that no one will ever recognize or acknowledge, and who in another time might have been champion of the world. ●



Patricia Anthony

GUARDIAN OF FIREFLIES

Carol Heyer



Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has just released the hardcover edition of Patricia Anthony's new novel, *Cold Allies*, and they will be publishing her next book, *Brother Termite*, in October. Ms. Anthony recently completed *Happy Policeman*, another new science fiction novel.

Five-year old Kimberly ran across the twilight field, blond hair flying, small legs pumping, arms upraised. She chased her father's voice as she might have chased fireflies.

Jeremy paused in his work to look. Now here, now there, Kimberly darted, the voice forever an arm's length away. The red lights on the EM monitors waxed and waned with the drift of the Tink.

Jeremy noticed with shock how accurate she was, how honed the radar of her need. More intuitive than he, he thought, glancing at the laptop across his knees. The data's pattern was frustrating, elusive, like an almost-remembered dream.

Frowning, Jeremy glanced up. In the center of the field Kimberly had stopped, wrapping her arms tightly around air. Her small face was bruised by the dying light, her head cradled to the side as though waiting for strong arms to lift her.

"Kimberly!"

At the terror-stricken shout, Jeremy flinched and turned around. Mrs. Taft stood, a shadow in the dusk, behind him.

"Kimberly! You come back here! You come back now!"

Softly, Jeremy said, "I doubt another Tink will form, Mrs. Taft. There's no need to be afraid."

Her tone was woven with razor-wire panic. "Kimberly? You hear me? You get on in the house!"

Without a word, the little girl trudged through the thigh-deep grass toward the yellow window-beacons of the farmhouse.

Mrs. Taft stood for a moment, her worried gaze following her daughter's progress. "Brought you dinner," she finally said, handing him the basket she held in her left hand.

Jeremy took it, eyeing the other basket in her right. "You didn't have to," he said.

Ruby— At the soft whisper, Mrs. Taft raised her head. The breeze lifted invisible fingers to toy with her chestnut hair.

"He's calling me again," she told Jeremy. "Thought you said he couldn't do that."

Jeremy glanced at the empty field. The EM monitors flickered one-by-one in no apparent pattern, like the haunting of fireflies. "It's not what we expected."

"Then you don't know everything."

He didn't bother to reply. He was an interloper in Mrs. Taft's rural meadow; an intruder in the wonderland of Mark's truth.

"Tink," she whispered. "That's a funny name. Shouldn't put a funny name to something so terrible."

Ruby, please. Touch me. Can't you— Mr. Taft's voice came faint, carried on the wind's breath. The trapped man's entreaties had, over the last day and a half, reduced from the where-am-I's, the what's-happening-to-me's, to form the thick sediment of need.

"It's an observer in a kink in space-time," Jeremy explained. He remembered the night they put a name to it, Mark talking of quantum mechanics, Jeremy a half-step behind, the magic just out of reach. "Mark and I considered 'stink,' but the connotations—" He stopped, ashamed, his fragile grin fading like the day.

Ruby— The whisper held a pillow-soft, reconciled sorrow. Not three yards distant, an EM beacon flickered and then steadied to a bright, red glow.

Mrs. Taft took a step forward and then another, inching fearfully toward the light, the basket held out as though she prayed the food would be taken, not her.

At the beacon she halted and put the basket down.

Ruby. Please—

The glow turned her tears crimson as her namesake. It looked for a moment as though she wept blood. Suddenly her courage failed and, shaking her head, obviously angry at her own fear, she stepped back.

"It's an unbelievably rare phenomenon, Mrs. Taft. I really don't think another one will form," Jeremy said.

Her voice was sodden and bitter, words wrung from a vinegared sponge. " 'I don't think' this. 'I don't think' that. Don't you know nothing for sure?"

"No," he admitted. The data was so confusing that only Mark could have known. Mark had chased his bright answers with the same passion he had pursued his smooth-skinned boys.

I should have been enough for you, Jeremy had told him after learning of Mark's treachery, their shared illness.

Don't you understand by now? Mark, the deceiver, had asked. *Haven't I taught you anything? The universe is hungry for new experiences, Jer. And inside us are fractals of that appetite. Nothing and no one is ever enough.*

After a while Mrs. Taft left. Realizing it was time for his pill, he carried the laptop and the basket to the van. Sitting with the back doors open to the evening, Jeremy peered under the checkered cloth. Fried chicken. She'd made fried chicken again, Mr. Taft's favorite.

When Jeremy had taken his medication and had finished eating, he heard a rustling in the grass. A moment later Mrs. Taft emerged into the van's rectangular spill of light.

"Come to take the basket," she said.

He handed her the basket of biscuit crumbs, of chicken bones. "Excellent dinner again, Mrs. Taft. You really don't have to bother."

"No bother," she said, plucking the basket from his fingers. A furtive glance over her shoulder. Jeremy knew she was searching the dark grass.

"He's quiet now," she said.

Perhaps Bill Taft was dead. Jeremy took a deep breath. The night air tasted of mown hay, of damp earth. In the woods by the creek tree frogs sang vespers. "Yes."

"Maybe he's asleep," she murmured. "That's good. It's best when he's asleep. When he's awake and calling, he sounds so—"

Afraid, Jeremy thought. Bill Taft sounded so afraid.

After a moment she perched on the bumper and stared off into the gloom. "It dark where he is?"

"I don't know," Mark would have made stars, Jeremy knew. Mark would have created galaxies. He doubted the creativity of Bill Taft.

"He ever coming back?"

No, Jeremy thought; but he wasn't brave enough to tell her. It was Mrs. Taft who was made up of courage. Mrs. Taft, who believed in monsters; who stood and faced them alone.

"He sounds so tired," she said, her own voice weary.

Bill Taft wasn't simply tired. He was running out of air. When the Tink opened, it must have sucked in a limited supply, and now he was suffocating. "Yes," he agreed. "He does."

"Tell me again," she said without taking her gaze from the dark, star-ceilinged field.

He told her the story as he had dozens of times, wondering if she didn't yet understand; or if the telling simply made the night less lonely. "Spacetime has the consistency of foam," he said. "And the pattern that makes up the galaxies is repeated, smaller and smaller, down to the tiniest particles. Imagine that our universe is the beer and micro-universes the froth. Tiny, potential universes bubble up all the time. Mr. Taft walked into this field and encountered one which was just opening up. Because the universe now had an observer, it became stable."

When she didn't comment, he went on. "Mark explained once that it was like God played with dollhouses. When they were empty, the dollhouses would appear and disappear. Once a doll had been placed in them, though, the dollhouse had to stick around. Mark could explain this better," he said with bitterness. "Everything came easy to Mark. He was always quick with analogy. Quick with anything."

Jeremy had learned from Mark that good stories should be brief. Mrs. Taft was an intelligent woman, but one of simple words. After the first few tellings he had dropped puzzling phrases like "fractals," like "quantum tunneling," and "Big Bangs."

Glancing to Mrs. Taft, he saw her nod in appreciation. Her voice, though, was hard. "God should have been more careful."

"Yes," he told her. "He should have been."

Out in the meadow a beacon flickered briefly, Bill Taft, restless in dream.

"Mark," she said. "You talked about him before."

"Yes. Mark. Dr. Guthrie. He conceived the theory, and we worked on it together." Jeremy pressed his lips together hard. "He was—" His voice flickered and died like an EM beacon sensing transient life. "He is—a fine physicist."

"Sometimes I think I won't never hear him again," she said.

For a disorienting moment, Jeremy thought she was talking about Mark and wondered how she knew.

"My Bill doesn't hear me when I call."

"No," Jeremy said as gently as the truth allowed. "No. I doubt he does."

After a while she took the empty basket and walked to the house, leaving the full one behind.

When she had gone, Jeremy sat, the laptop across his legs, reviewing his data. He drank one beer, and then another, not seeing, but sensing the net of uncaring foam tickle the inside walls of the can.

At midnight the beacons flickered. *Ruby. Where—* Bill Taft called as he wandered the empty field.

Jeremy drained his beer and put his can down at the end of the neat row of five others. Swaying a little, he walked out into the meadow. Whenever he approached, the voice of Bill Taft moved out of reach.

"I caught fireflies once," he whispered to the dying man. "Like God, I put them in a jar."

Ruby— The voice moved away, slippery as the breeze. To the back of the meadow a flutter of red. Bill Taft in his quantum bottle. Bill Taft left in Jeremy's incapable, careless hands.

If you were going to cheat, you should have been more careful, he'd told Mark. *You should have taken precautions.*

Jeremy's one hand had been clutching his suitcase's handle, his other grasped the doorknob.

Please don't leave, Mark had said.

No wonder you weren't content with me. I was always just a plodder, Jeremy had muttered. *If God had given me your sort of genius, I would have eaten right. Would have worn my seatbelt. Wouldn't have staked my life on the safety of a condom. Oh, shit, Mark. The thing that makes me the most angry is that you threw it all away.*

Mark's expression had been woeful, contrite. *There isn't any God, Jer. Just infinite probabilities.*

With a sigh, Jeremy gave up ego's battle. He walked back to the van, lifted the phone's screen and dialed the familiar number.

A hard-faced, grey haired woman answered. On the other side of the room, a television was playing quietly. An old movie, Jeremy noticed. One about black and white cowboys riding a monochrome meadow.

"I'm sorry," Jeremy said in surprise. His lips felt numb, his tongue beer-mushy. "I've got—maybe I dialed the wrong number. I was wanting to reach Dr. Mark Guthrie."

"I'm his night nurse. Do you know what time it is?" the woman shot back.

Blearily, Jeremy glanced at his watch.

"It's one o'clock in the damned morning," she continued. "And Dr. Guthrie's ill—"

"I know," he snapped. "I know that, but this is important. He'll want to talk to me. I've discovered something vital about his theory. Tell him Jeremy Schoen's calling. This will amuse him: tell him that, as usual, I'm in over my head."

Her face softened. "Oh. Dr. Schoen. Of course. He speaks a lot about you. Just a moment and let me change phones."

She put him on hold. The delay was so long that Jeremy nearly rebuilt the bulwark of his self-esteem brick by crumbling brick. By the time the picture on the screen blinked on again, he'd decided he could handle the problem himself and had almost hung up.

It was the nurse again. She whispered. "He's awake. I know he wants to hear from you, but don't tire him out."

Displayed on a nightstand was the miscellany of illness: an army of pill bottles; a pitcher of water, which, by the adherent bubbles, had stood long enough to go flat.

And an open Bible. Jeremy's gaze riveted on the incongruity, its marker lying across its pages like a stripe of blood.

The woman's plump hand went out to the monitor and its attendant camera. The picture in the screen began to turn.

No, Jeremy thought in alarm, realizing what the presence of the Bible must mean.

Too late. Far too late for apologies. Mark was suddenly there, inert on the bed, bridled by oxygen tubes. In the months since Jeremy had seen him, the soft flesh of his face had weathered to the skull's bedrock. On his cheeks he wore the purple hearts of Karposi's sarcoma. His stick hands were lying over his chest, the bone at the wrist naked and round as a marble.

Oh, Mark— Jeremy's mind's voice was as weary as Bill Taft's.

"I've been meaning to come by," Jeremy lied fitfully. "I just haven't had the time, what with the treatments and my work." *Mark's work,* his mind corrected. "Well," he said with false cheer. "I'm in remission now, and the doctors think I'll be just fine."

Mark didn't answer. The silence might have meant that, for the first time, he was jealous; it might simply have meant he hadn't the strength. Jeremy listened to the hiss of oxygen through the tubes, the feeble rattling of Mark's breath.

"Isaac Abrams told me he called you," Jeremy said. "So you know where I am."

Mark opened his trembling mouth as though to speak, but instead sucked in a labored, strangled breath. In his eyes was a drowning-man panic.

The nurse leaned forward, adjusted the oxygen, settled him higher on the pillows. With a tissue she mopped the spittle from his chin.

She finished and stood back. Mark was, in an exhausted sort of way, breathing again.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, but I need your help," Jeremy said, searching the ruined face for the man he'd once known. "I'm getting readings I don't understand."

Mark blinked slowly. The spark of curiosity in his eyes had burned out, smothered under the ash of terror.

"I'm lost," Jeremy admitted. "There's unexpected—"

Mark's lungs rattled. His eyes wavered closed.

"He's getting tired," the nurse said from beyond the range of the phone's camera.

He's dying— Jeremy thought, feeling an urge to grasp the image in the screen, to feel the pixels run through his fingers like grains of ionized sand.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Please. There's an anomaly, Mark. He's still alive," Jeremy told him. "Do you hear me? Bill Taft's still alive. I hear his voice. His family does, too."

Suddenly the eyes opened. The face suffused with bewildering longing, a look of bottled hope.

"You can't imagine how eerie it is," Jeremy went on. "Hearing that voice coming from nowhere. It's—"

A clogged-drain rattle. A ragged gasp. Mark's sunken chest fluttered. He was trying, it seemed, to sit up.

"Don't upset him," the nurse said. "He needs his rest."

"Just a minute, please. Mark. I'm coming to see you next week. I promise. But before I do, I need—"

A week would be too long, he knew. Like Bill Taft, Mark was left with too little air. "I need—" Jeremy stopped himself, considering the importance of the Bible, considering the terror behind Mark's gaze.

"Let him sleep," the nurse said.

"Bill Taft sounds happy," Jeremy said in a rush. "He sounds just fine, Mark. I know it doesn't make sense, but the Tink he's in. . . . I think he's created something. I think he's created a new existence. It's—"

Just before the nurse broke the connection, Jeremy saw Mark's fear supplanted by ravenous hope. Gently he closed the phone's case and sat with it cradled in his arms.

After a while he rose and walked into the meadow to stand with the other dying man. "When I was eight years old," he told the moving light, "I trapped fireflies in a jar."

They had been beautiful, winking on his night-shrouded dresser. He'd ridden to sleep in their glow.

"But people are careless," he explained. "God forgets things."

And magic couldn't be bottled. That was the truth Jeremy couldn't allow Mark to know.

"My fault. I forgot to poke holes in the jar's lid, you see," Jeremy said to the flashing beacons. "They suffocated as I slept."

Jeremy thought of his negligent hand on the suitcase, his indifferent fingers on the knob. The small, lifeless bodies at the bottom of the jar. Bill Taft beat himself against his quantum glass as Jeremy, the plodder, guardian of fireflies, kept watch. ●

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

AUXILIARY VERBS

Could said she might, but wasn't sure,
And so I said good-bye to her.

Might said he may: that's not enough.
I want a verb who'll show his stuff.

Would said if he could he'd try,
But Would will often tell a lie.

May said she might or she might not
And wanted to know what I had brought.

Should said yes, if *I* were good.
But if I'm not? Please leave, said Should.

Will was the last I importuned.
Now he's dead with a shrapnel wound,

And there he lies with matching tats
Of *Do or Die!* across his lats.

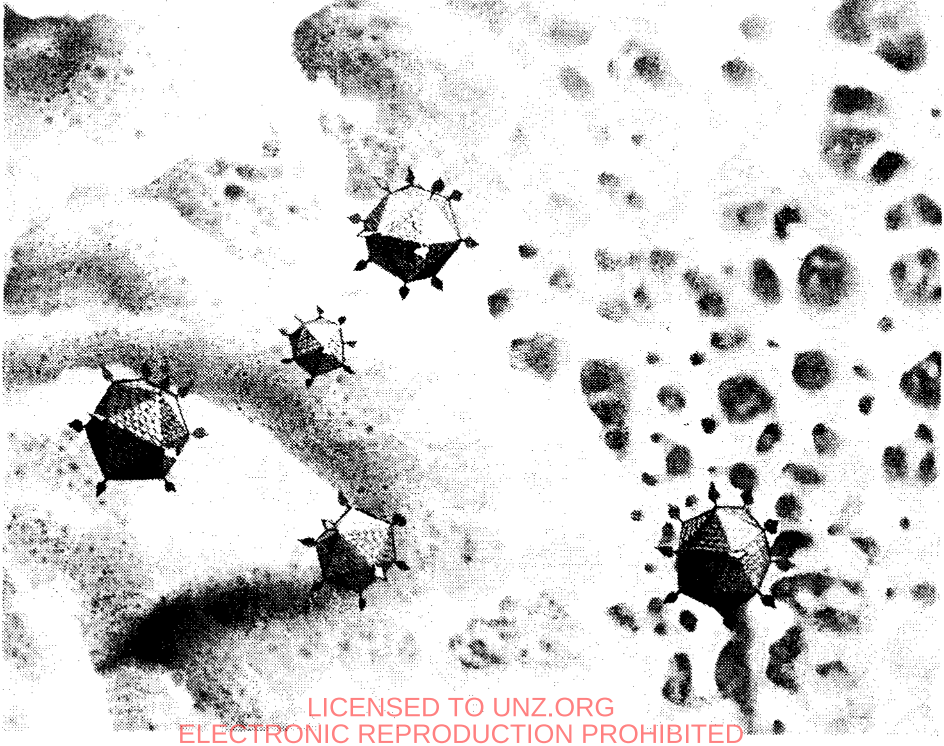
—Tom Disch

Maureen F. McHugh
and David B. Kisor

WHISPERS

David B. Kisor is a composer and musician who used to work at the same company as Maureen F. McHugh. The two often got together to commiserate about how hard it was to be both creative and hold a day job. While on the loading docks one afternoon, Dave got thinking about disease and an idea for a story. The following tale, our first from Mr. Kisor and our ninth from Ms. McHugh, is the result of that idea.

art: Alan M. Clark



The plague is not the only health problem in the countryside surrounding Tai'an. Shandong is a rural province, the Appalachia of China. Shandong peasants are the hillbillies of China, and have something of the same reputation—apparently not very bright, distrustful of strangers, local boys who let you think you're real smart until they get you out on their own terms. I don't know if they're moonshiners; the clear local sorghum liquor (which we foreigners call "jet fuel" because it smells like fingernail polish and is usually about 150 proof) is probably too cheap to encourage much bootlegging.

Not that it's Lexington or Louisville. A Kentucky girl like me doesn't feel at home; after all, Kentucky isn't particularly famous for its brine-pickled vegetables (not just cucumber; but carrots, and cabbage with hot peppers, too). The land is bare and brown, the hills covered in places with dead grass and a few pine trees, but in other places scratched to bare, baked or frozen earth.

I work in a clinic about an hour south of Tai'an, headed toward Qufu, the ancient birthplace of Confucius. The town is called Lijiazhang, and the clinic is brick and concrete. It used to be a store. I vaccinate for plague, and treat a lot of poverty-related diseases, too. Tuberculosis is rampant because they burn bituminous coal (this part of Shandong is coal country, mountainous like West Virginia). Bituminous coal is soft, high-sulfur coal. Black-lung stuff when they mine it. Here, after they get it out of the ground, they grind it to powder in places with so little regard for workers' health that OSHA representatives would probably have seizures, then they mix it with mud to make dull-black round bricks with holes through them. They burn the bricks in stoves to heat and cook. The bricks burn more slowly than pure coal.

We burn the bricks in the clinic, too. Our stove is a red-brick affair, kind of like an oven. It's got a vent, but the pipe doesn't draw correctly, and it's thick with whatever the stuff is that clogs coal stoves. I thought I read that the stuff is dangerous and can cause explosions, but nobody seems particularly concerned. Much of the smoke from the stove hangs in the clinic. Like everybody else, I've had a chest cold since November, and when I spit into the toilet after working all day, my saliva is laced with black from the smoke. We test ourselves for tuberculosis every sixty days. So far, nobody has tested positive. I wonder what two years in China is going to do for my health. Besides lung damage from the pollution, they still use DDT and pesticides that have been banned in the US for fifty years. It would be ironic to have survived the plague in my childhood only to die a few years from now of cancer that originated in exposure from something in Tai'an.

Particularly since, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, the locals have made it clear that they don't think much of the efficacy of Western medicine in treating EID. The new vaccine is only about 50 percent effective. Furthermore, if the host has already been infected and the virus is latent, vaccination can activate it. It's hard to explain to people that the vaccine doesn't *cause* the disease. It's not what they want—they want Western medicine to provide instant answers, or they'll go back to their own methods.

Surely, at the end of a long day with the lepers, tired out of his mind, even Albert Schweitzer sat on his cot among his chickens and goats and wondered how he had managed to so thoroughly screw up his life.

Terry, Megan, and I are at the clinic by 8:00 A.M. We are medical practitioners, MPs. I hope to go to medical school when I get back to the States and become an MD. I thought that coming to China would give me practical experience, and that it would be a chance to travel. A once-in-a-lifetime chance. Maybe, like Dr. Schweitzer, I would find my calling.

My third patient this morning is a boy about sixteen, whose name is Zhao Lianfeng. Small-boned, with tiny beautiful hard brown hands, dirt ingrained in the knuckles. He has a fever, difficulty breathing, anxiety, and he tells Xiao Cao he hears voices whispering in his blood. Entotic Illusory Disease (EID) means illusions in the ear. Zhao Lianfeng is lucid, despite the whispering he hears. Patients often are. No one has ever been able to explain the whispers, despite all the mumbo-jumbo we rattle off about fever and R-brains and induced dream states.

"What do the voices say?" I ask. I ask a lot of my patients that. I get some strange answers.

"They are whispering in a foreign language," Xiao Cao translates.

Sometimes they are whispering too quietly for the patient to make out the words.

I stroke his forehead, and he looks up at me. The Chinese don't touch much across genders. Boyfriend and girlfriend don't hold hands in public, although a couple of boys can walk down the street with their arms around each other's shoulders and nobody pays any attention. But I touch my patients a lot. Sick people need comforting.

I can't do a lot else for Zhao Lianfeng. The only things I can give him are fluids for dehydration, broad-spectrum antibiotics against secondary infections, and something for his breathing. He will either live or die. So I hold his hand, while his mother, a middle-aged woman with a perm that lays precisely as the rollers were placed in her hair, watches me. After a moment, the inhaler has helped his breathing. "*Shi hao ma?*" I ask, "You good?" in the local version of Mandarin.

He smiles for me. "*Shi haode*," he says. "Good." His hand is calloused. Peasant boys have calloused hands. In Shandong, peasant isn't a description of what you do for a living. This boy doesn't farm, he works in a village factory. He helps make parts for motor scooters. But he is still a peasant, because he wears quilted navy-blue cotton jackets and pants. Because he lives in a village. Because, at sixteen, he has finished school and says *shi haode* instead of *hen hao*, the way a city boy would. Like saying "ain't," or "pitcher" for "picture."

I smile at Zhao Lianfeng, and I smile at his mother.

His mother doesn't smile. She isn't fooled, she knows my remedies are temporary. For my records, I ask for a history. Has he had a history of illness? I check bronchitis without bothering to ask; here everybody has bronchitis in the winter. How about his family? Xiao Cao translates: the boy's father is dead of EID, which the Chinese around here call the Whispers, his mother had it but recovered, twelve years ago. His sister had it as a child, but survived. Anyone else? His mother shakes her head.

"*Didi*," the boy says, "little brother."

The mother turns her head away.

I press her through Xiao Cao: what happened to the little brother?

"*Baixuebing*." Xiao Cao finally translates, "White blood sickness."

Leukemia. The leukemia rate among children in China is one of the highest in the world, the result of years of toxics being dumped into the air, the land, and the water. I put my forms in his folder. At the end of the month, I'll tabulate it all, send my report to someone in Geneva at the World Health Organization. It's all entered into a data file, but nobody pays much attention to the results. There's no pattern, or rather, no particularly surprising pattern. EID is virulently contagious, spread by contact, endemic. It is particularly bad among the impoverished, who are, of course, susceptible because of poor nutrition and health and overcrowding. Although, since EID has killed over a billion-and-a-half people world wide, over-crowding in places like Bangladesh and Mexico City is much less of a problem than it used to be.

I survived because *I am an American*, and, as a child, I was among the first to get it. I got it in 1996, when hospital care was available that wasn't available a year later, when medical services were completely overwhelmed by the number of cases. My father got it early, too, but died despite great medical care. My mother didn't get it until three years later, when medical care was nearly non-existent, but she survived anyway. Like Zhao Lianfeng's mother survived it.

Zhao Lianfeng does not want to let go of my hand, but I have other patients, so he must. If his mother had brought him in for a vaccination two years ago, he might not be sick now. The disease can lie dormant for years, though, so if he'd had it already, but was asymptomatic, the vaccine might have activated the virus too.

Sometimes they live, I think. And then there's the next patient, there's always a next patient.

Usually part of me is numb. I'm tired all the time from my chest cold, and the number of patients is overwhelming. Patients are all frightened; some are brave, some aren't. I treat toddlers, I treat old people. A lot of them die. A lot of them don't even die of EID; China doesn't need EID to find a way to kill you. Just breathe coal dust all winter, or drink yourself to death on 150 proof sorghum liquor, or die of untreated diabetes, or heart disease, or the astounding cancer rate, or pneumonia. Or get run over by a coal truck out in the country, and die because there's no medical aid at all for most of the villages.

When I come back to the clinic the next morning, Zhao Lianfeng's fever has spiked to 41 degrees Celsius during the night, about 105 Fahrenheit. Now it is down around 39 degrees. His mother has spent the night with him. When I come by his bed, she watches me without reproach. Without much hope, either.

"*Daifu*," Lianfeng says when I lean over him. "Doctor." I sit down for a moment and hold his calloused, dry-hot hand.

Their faces are the pinched angular faces of country people. Square-jawed. For all their differences of race, they are like the faces in the black-and-white photos of people from places with names like Jackson Hollow and Stinking Creek. Or like the Dust Bowl faces of Okies.

I have the strange urge to lean over and kiss Zhao Lianfeng's cheek. It comes over me with patients sometimes; I never tell anyone. It is not an Albert Schweitzer love-of-all-mankind urge, it is just an urge to touch that young and shining skin, those hectic red cheeks. Even dried by fever.

He says something, and I recognize *eryu*, "whisper." They are whispering. "Ssss ssss ssss," he says, trying to mimic the sibilance he hears.

I hold his hand and rub his forehead.

"Kate," Xiao Cao says. Patients waiting. Triage, ignore the dying boy I can do nothing for, concentrate on finding the ones I *can* help.

Xiao Cao doesn't have that pinched look. He is thin, a beanpole of a young man, but he is a city boy. He graduated from the Foreign Languages department in Tai'an Teacher's College, his father is a professor. I like Xiao Cao, he is open and trusting and naïve. Chinese young people seem younger than their peers in the States. Maybe that is simply because he is less sophisticated in *my* culture than he is in his own. Maybe *I* seem simpler, unsophisticated, to *him*.

He is also a tremendous help in the clinic. He has been vaccinated against EID, and is happy to be a model of the efficacy of the vaccine. He preaches western medicine to the patients, thinks of us as the Americans who have developed the vaccine, who will save everyone if they will just come and let us.

I worry about what he tells people; his ideas are a weird mix of what we tell him and local speculation. One day he announced to me that the reason we foreigners get so many colds is that we wear flat shoes. Colds come from the ground, up through your feet, he told me. Wear heels and get your feet off the ground, and there is less surface for the colds to get through.

I wonder what kind of life it is for a young man like him, working with Americans and sick people.

The morning is the usual parade. Most people do not come to us unless they are very sick. We refer some on to the hospital in Tai'an, but most don't go. In China, your health care is paid for by your work unit, that is, your factory or employer. But the peasants don't have work units, and they have to pay for their own health care, up front. If a dying man walks into a Chinese hospital without cash, he dies in the waiting room. I palpitate a man's stomach, find a mass. I tell him he needs to see a doctor in Tai'an, give him a prescription for pain, and he goes home to die.

A woman with tuberculosis I can treat. I start her on a course of antibiotics, tell her to send the rest of the family to be tested in case they have caught it from her.

We stop accepting patients at 11:30; lunch is at noon.

"*Daifu*," Zhao Lianfeng says. His fever is up to 40 degrees Celsius. I take his hot hand. I used to want to clean them up, the rings of dirt on their collars distressed me, but dirt doesn't really hurt or help him now. I sit a moment, give him a new IV bag, go on to lunch.

Lunch is hot and spicy cabbage, clear soup, and rice. It's one of my favorite lunches, but Terry doesn't really care for cabbage.

"You know what I'm really hungry for," Terry says.

It's a game, a kind of torture we inflict on ourselves. Sometimes I've played with tears in my eyes, but one of the unwritten rules is to pretend it's only a game.

Terry's meal is pizza, a big tossed salad with ranch dressing, a two liter bottle of Coke. He swipes his kinky blond hair out of his eyes and throws in a Steelers–Oilers game. Tall, fair Terry is so foreign-looking that I've seen him cause bicycle accidents; most of the locals have never seen a foreigner, and when they see us, they stare. As we walk down the street, the whispers follow us, "*Weiguoren, weiguoren.*" Foreigner, foreigner.

Megan's meal is steak, baked potato, broccoli with cheese sauce, and apple pie.

My meal is skillet-fried chicken, mashed potatoes with milk gravy, and green beans. My mother's, but I don't say that. I'll write it in my next letter. Thinking of my mother makes me think of Zhao Lianfeng's mother, sitting next to her son at the clinic. I bet I know Zhao Lianfeng's favorite meal—Chinese dumplings, potstickers.

I don't want to go back to work. I want to go home.

The next morning, I am surprised: Zhao Lianfeng is still holding on. He does not say *daifu* when I sit down, but he opens his eyes. I take his hand, smile at him. "Hold on, little brother," I say in English.

He closes his eyes.

Xiao Cao comes to tell me I have patients, and Zhao Lianfeng opens his eyes. He says something to the air, to no one in particular.

"They are whispering," Xiao Cao translates.

"What are they whispering?" I ask.

For a long moment, Zhao Lianfeng does not answer. Then he says something ". . . *shi haode.*"

"They say, hold on, you're good, you're okay," Xiao Cao translates.

I smile and nod. "*Shi haode,*" I agree, "you're good."

Zhao Lianfeng doesn't seem to care, he just closes his eyes.

I check on him on and off during the day. We have twenty-seven beds, all filled. Zhao Lianfeng's temperature is back up between 40 and 41 degrees, somewhere around 104 degrees Fahrenheit. He is not really conscious. It is really only a matter of time.

I am hoping that when I come to work the next morning, the bed will simply be empty. But the next morning, Zhao Lianfeng is still there, still suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, still running a fever that must, by now, be causing brain damage. There are no facilities here for rehabilitation, so if he is brain damaged, he will go back to his village and his mother will take care of him. Or not take care of him.

So I begin to hope that he will die. Maybe I am terrible, maybe Albert Schweitzer would feel differently. I know that there is sanctity in all human life and that I took an oath—even medical practitioners take an oath—but there is sanctity in death, too.

Zhao Lianfeng doesn't die. Not that whole long day.

Nor the next day, although the fever is wasting him nearly down to the bone. I force myself to sit down, to take his hand and brush his hair off his forehead, but long black hairs come away in my hand.

His mother sleeps sitting on the floor, her back to the wall, or wakes and waits.

After three days, I am thinking the unthinkable. There are lots of things I could add to his IV bag and Zhao Lianfeng would slide gently away. I've never done it. Doctors, real full-degree MD doctors do it, although usually not officially. I think Megan has done it, although she says she hasn't. Terry never would. Terry might be from the suburbs of Chicago, but he comes from a conservative family. Terry brought his

Bible to China with him, belongs to a Bible Study group at home. Terry really believes in the sanctity of human life and lets God make all the calls on the quality of life.

Albert Schweitzer would leave it to God. Kate Lambert of Lexington, Kentucky doesn't trust leaving things to God, or to other men, either. Maybe we're supposed to make that decision, maybe that's part of being a healer.

But I don't do it because I can't do it in front of his mother. Not that she would know, necessarily; I put antibiotics in his drip, how could she know this is different? But she would be watching and I just can't see myself doing it under her eyes. What if I were wrong? It's not likely that he has a chance of recovery, nothing in my experience indicates that Zhao Lianfeng will ever go back to the little sweatshop run by his village and make parts for motor scooters again. Most likely he will die without my help or, at worst, he will recover from EID and go home to his village with cerebral palsy, or aphasia or paralysis, maybe end up tied in a bed and fed with a spoon.

Most likely, I tell myself, he will die. Eventually I'll forget about him, forget about feeling guilty. Eventually I'll go home to Lexington, Kentucky, and eat skillet-fried chicken and mashed potatoes with milk gravy.

After five days, Zhao Lianfeng's fever begins to drop. It drops to 39 degrees Celsius, spikes 41 again, drops again to 39 by the sixth day. By the seventh day, it is below normal, which is common after a fever. He isn't conscious, although his eyes are slightly open.

His aunt sits next to the bed; his mother has gone home to rest a few days. I keep an IV of glucose going, and antibiotics, of course, and otherwise avoid the bed.

Two days later, he is still not conscious, not truly. His aunt can prop him up in bed, and he'll even take broth, but he's in a vegetative state. Which may be permanent. When he closes his eyes, he looks angelic, his wrists as thin as a child's. I stop to look one afternoon, and he is curled up on his side with his thumb in his mouth.

After that, I ask Megan to take over. She doesn't ask for any explanation; once in awhile we just trade patients.

We are done with him, and his family comes with a truck borrowed from the headman of their village, bundles him into quilts, and takes him home.

That weekend, Terry decides that I need R&R. What he really means is that it is his and my turn to spend a weekend in Beijing going to foreign motels in our cheap Chinese coats, looking like the missionaries who come down from the hills to buy supplies. We take the train to

Jinan, and then six more hours to Beijing, and eat lasagna at the Jianguo Hotel coffee shop. It's a bland concoction of cheese and meat. So many Chinese are lactose intolerant that they don't eat cheese (which has never explained the popularity of ice cream, but it's true), and every time we go it's been so long since I've eaten western food that it makes me sick, but it's still wonderful. Even in the evening, jagged out on Cokes and crying in the bathroom with the water running so Terry won't hear.

Two days of hot running water, heated rooms, Cokes, and candy bars. It costs half my monthly stipend, but there's not a lot else to spend my monthly stipend on, so I can't really get upset. I use the hotel long distance phones to call home, "How are you, Mom?" "It's eight o'clock in the evening here, what time is it there?" "How are you, how's your cold?" "The cold is doing great, Mom, but I feel terrible, ha ha."

And then, Sunday night, we take the train, soft sleeper berths, back into China. My backpack is stuffed with Cokes and Snickers Bars and two buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken to share with Megan for manning the store. Hell of a dinner we'll have, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Qingdao beer.

It's all incredible luxury; my monthly stipend is 1600 yuan, less than $400 US. Making parts for motor scooters, Zhao Lianfeng probably made around 200 yuan a month. Good money in China, but it doesn't buy many cans of Coke at 4 yuan a pop.

Just because Zhao Lianfeng can't afford it, does that mean I should forego it all myself? I don't know what Albert Schweitzer's view was on going native, but I suspect he'd find my existence decadent.

"*Daifu*," he says, beaming. It's March, six weeks after Zhao Lianfeng left the clinic, bundled in cotton quilts. The weather is warmer, but he is still bundled up, still painfully thin. His mother has his arm, steadying him. His coordination has been affected by the fever. Still he smiles at me. "*Daifu*," he says.

His mother explains through Xiao Cao that he has been after her to come see the *daifu*. He seems delighted and childlike, a bit simple. He smiles and smiles, eyes squinched in the sunlight.

"Come in, let me look you over," I say.

Underneath his cotton shirt, his collar bones rise like wings, but he seems basically healthy. His chest is clear, his ears and eyes good. His blood pressure is low, but not drastically, his heart sounds strong.

His mother explains that he was like a baby at first, but that he has been "growing up."

"*Daifu*," he says, and then, in Chinese I can barely follow, "Doctor, they tell me, tell you, it's good."

I smile and nod. His speech is childlike. I've no way of testing the amount of damage done.

He frowns, and takes my hand and repeats insistently—Xiao Cao translating—"Tell her, they tell me, it's good."

"Shi haode," I agree, in my lame Chinese, "It's good."

He is distressed, though. My response isn't what he wants. He looks thoughtful. Frowns a moment. Finally he says, slowly, "Hold on, little brother."

English. Did he hear me say that? And now he remembers? "Incredible!" I say, delighted. Who knows how the human mind works, what it remembers, what it doesn't?

But he doesn't care about my response. He takes my hand and repeats, in the same slow way, "Hold on, little brother." He is probably even mimicking my inflection, he sounds as if he is trying to comfort me. Of course, I'm vulnerable. We are all living on the edge of nerves, Terry, Megan and I. There's not much left over to comfort each other, and I *want* comfort, so badly. I can feel the tears rising in my eyes.

He nods, thin faced, clear-eyed. He'll come back, he promises.

And he does, every couple of weeks. At first, he comes with his cousin or his uncle, getting off the bus carefully, like an old man. Each time we go through the same ritual, and I check him over. Then he sits and watches me while I work with other patients. In June, Megan's two years are up, and Terry and Xiao Cao take her to Beijing and put her on a plane home. The next time Zhao Lianfeng comes to see me, he gets off the bus alone, no cousin or uncle helping him, and stands in the hot June sun, smiling at his accomplishment. I introduce him to Jeff, Megan's replacement, and I give him a Snickers bar from Beijing. He thinks Snickers Bars are *shi haode.*

In June, one of our EID cases (we average about fifteen a month) goes through the same stages as Lianfeng's. She is a woman in her forties, but after five days of high fever, her temperature comes back to below normal. By the seventh day, she is curled up on her side, sucking her thumb. At the end of the month, I include the information in my report to Geneva.

In July, Lianfeng is still thin, the points of his bare shoulders are sharp under his skin. He wears a bright pink strap T-shirt and baggy, navy-blue pants. His speech improves. He learns a little English. "Hello, Kate-ah *Daifu,*" he says when he gets off the bus in August. A miracle, I think. A tribute to the resiliency of the human body. And, despite his fragile look, he remains surprisingly healthy. His lungs stay clear even in this country, where it seems that no one has clear lungs. A little bundle of bone, he sweeps out the clinic one day.

"Do you work, do you have a job?" I ask through Xiao Cao.

He nods. He is making parts for motor scooters again, although he looks like a stiff wind would knock him over. “Okay, Kate-ah *Daifu*,” he says, “Lianfeng okay. They tell you, thank you.”

My Chinese is getting a little better. “Who are ‘they’?”

“*Eryu-de*,” he says, and I have to get a translation. He doesn’t want to tell Xiao Cao, but he finally does, “Whisperers.”

“Do you still hear whispers?” I ask. I’ve never heard of anyone still hearing whispers after they’ve recovered, but it could be residual damage.

But he doesn’t want to talk in front of Xiao Cao, countryside boy saying foolish things in front of the city boy. He turns his head away and won’t answer.

EID cases are on the upswing worldwide. The disease seems to have changed. It’s done this periodically over the last twenty years. It doesn’t seem to start in one area and travel; when it changes, it seems to change abruptly all over the world, all at once. One of the more peculiar qualities of EID. We have twenty-one cases in August. Seven of our cases exhibit the Lianfeng cycle. Eleven of the more traditional cases die, three recover in a more typical fashion.

In September, Zhao Lianfeng cleans our coal flue. He has quick hands, the hands of a mechanic. My uncle, my father’s brother, had those hands, stained around the nails with oil and grime after a Saturday spent fixing the car. My uncle is dead of EID, died when I was nine; the sudden strength of the memory surprises me.

In October, I realize that Zhao Lianfeng is growing. He is seventeen, and it’s not unheard of for seventeen-year-olds to grow, but he is still so thin, so fragile-looking. But he’s added two inches, he looks me in the eye. Me, the solid, heavy-hipped 5’7” giantess from the west.

I don’t give him physical exams anymore, but with this sudden growth spurt, I feel compelled to have him sit on the examining table. He climbs up for me, and I realize that over the last couple of months he has regained all the coordination he lost. His temperature at his monthly exam is 35 degrees Celsius, way below normal. His blood pressure is 85 over 50. I smile at him, pretending not to be concerned. He has bruises under the skin on the insides of his elbows and knees. Anemia? Leukemia? Bruising is a symptom of leukemia, but usually there is a rise in temperature. I’ve never heard of somebody with leukemia having a low body temperature. Maybe the EID caused heart damage, but his hands are not cold.

I need Xiao Cao for this. “Lianfeng,” I say, “I want you to go with me to the hospital in Tai’an.”

Xiao Cao knows this is bad, but his face betrays nothing.

“Don’t worry about money,” I say, “this won’t cost you anything.” I don't want to alarm him. I want to have blood tests run. I think of the hospital in Tai'an, and cringe, remembering water standing on the uneven concrete floor, spittoons in the corners. They have a heart-lung machine, the only one in the province, but they still give injections with re-usable syringes. Hepatitis? Could this be some odd manifestation of hepatitis?

"Kate-ah *Daifu*," Lianfeng says, "*mei guanxi.*" "It doesn't matter."

"*Shi haode*," I say, "it's good."

He shakes his head. "Tai'an hospital, no go," he says. And launches into a torrent of Chinese with Xiao Cao. A conversation in Mandarin sounds like an argument in English. Sometimes I wonder if the Chinese are all slightly hard of hearing. But the upshot is that he says he doesn't need to go, he is not sick. He says that several times, emphatically. Despite the evidence in front of me, despite a chest like a washboard, despite the yoke of his collar and shoulder bones, despite his deer-narrow wrists.

"He says it is 'them,' " Xiao Cao reports. "He says they are just still making some changes."

"What does he mean, 'them'?"

"I think he means demons," Xiao Cao confides. "*Guai-zi ma?*" he asks Lianfeng.

Lianfeng snaps a negative, offended, and launches into a torrent.

I can't follow the rest of the argument. It must be hot, Xiao Cao is angry. When Xiao Cao gets angry or has a beer, his whole face flushes down to his collar, as if he has been washed in watercolor. He is flushed now, and arguing back.

"Enough!" I finally shout. "What?" I say to Xiao Cao.

Xiao Cao has a sense of the enormity of his responsibilities as mouthpiece for western medicine, and he draws himself up. "He says I am calling him a stupid peasant," Xiao Cao explains. "He says he doesn't believe in demons, and that the whisperers are real. It doesn't matter what you call it, though, it is superstition, whether you call it demons or whisperers."

Lianfeng knows he's being slandered, he can see it in Xiao Cao's face. "Kate-ah *Daifu*," he begins, but is immediately defeated by his lack of English vocabulary. In frustration, he turns on Xiao Cao again.

Again I manage to stop it. The important thing is the low body temperature and blood pressure, the bruising at his joints. I think the whispering is a red herring; it's probably residual brain damage from the fever, or even some sort of tinnitus. Maybe he's making meaning out of white noise; I don't know or care.

He argues—the whisperers say he is all right.

"Then it won't hurt to go to the hospital," I say.

Xiao Cao translates with glee, and Lianfeng can clearly think of no counter argument.

But the way he looks at me needs no translation. Betrayed by his beloved Kate-ah *Daifu*.

Wednesday morning, we are supposed to go to the hospital. It is a clear, cold October day, just two weeks after the October first holiday. October first is the Chinese Fourth of July. It and May Day are the only two official holidays. I don't know whether Lianfeng is going to get off the bus or not, but I am hoping. I don't know what village he lives in; if Lianfeng doesn't get off that bus, he could disappear out of my life forever, just slip into the vast pool of humanity in China, and I would never know.

I stand there in my quilted navy-blue coat, with my cap pulled down over my ears, and watch for the red-and-white long-distance bus. Finally, it comes slowly through the little town of Lijiazhuang, slowing to rattle across the railroad tracks, and stopping to let people off at the railway station. I can hear the gears grind a block away, and the blue smoke of the exhaust rises.

It stops in front of the clinic, and two men get off, but neither of them is Lianfeng.

I am not surprised. I am feeling as if I am supposed to be surprised, but I am not. I betrayed Lianfeng's trust in the argument with Xiao Cao, I could tell. I don't know what else I could have done, though.

"Kate-ah *Daifu?*" one of the men says.

It's not Lianfeng. Oh Lord, is the boy sick? If he is sick, what can I do for him in a village in the middle of nowhere? The logistics of getting him to the hospital in Tai'an seem insurmountable. And how would I pay for a hospital visit?

"Come in," I say, "come in," gesturing like a friend for the man to follow. "Xiao Cao. Xiao Cao!"

It is Lianfeng's uncle (mother's younger brother, Chinese is very specific about family relationships). Lianfeng is fine, he explains through Xiao Cao. He could not come today, he is sorry. There is a chance for a big order for motor scooter parts, but Lianfeng must build a machine, a kind of stamp or mold—Xiao Cao's English doesn't include much practice at manufacturing parts. Lianfeng, it turns out, can build machines like no one else. He is making the village wealthy, the uncle says proudly.

"He's sick," I say.

No, the uncle says, Lianfeng said that Kate-ah *Daifu* would be very upset, but she must understand, he is fine. But he will come Friday, and go to the hospital with her.

China. Goddamn China, where you make plans and they say, sorry, not today. No tickets available for the train. Or they come at seven in the morning, unannounced, and say, are you ready?

"You don't understand," I say, searching my smattering of Chinese. Anger, I discover, improves my ability to speak. "He is sick." I grasp for something to make them understand the importance. "I don't know, I think, *baixuebing*." White blood disease. Leukemia. "Maybe," I add in English, for Xiao Cao to translate, "I don't know. I need a hospital to tell me."

The uncle is a young man, in his thirties, a peasant with bad teeth and thoughtful eyes. He listens, and absorbs, and is very still. He looks at me for a long moment. Then he nods, and, through Xiao Cao, he says to tell me that he will bring Lianfeng tomorrow. He cannot bring him today, the bus back to the village doesn't leave until two, it will be too late when he gets home.

He won't stay, he has errands to do in Lijiazhuang.

Watching him walk off through the crisp morning, carrying his string bag for purchases, I am embarrassed by my anger. The man has made a trip that will cost him ten hours out of his day, in order to make excuses for Zhao Lianfeng. Because I'm a western doctor, and western doctors are important, have a certain prestige. Forget that I'm not really a doctor—in China, I have more training than most of the local doctors. If the plague hadn't hit China, maybe there would be a phone, but there is no phone in the clinic, maybe no phone in Zhao Lianfeng's village. Oh, China! Oh, Lianfeng!

At least the uncle understands the importance of getting Lianfeng here.

Thursday morning, we ride the train to Tai'an together. We are riding hardseat for the hour trip to the city. It's a local train, lots of stops, lots of peasants getting on all bundled-up in quilted jackets and layers of pants, women carrying bags the size of suitcases. The men slouch on a seat—if they can get one—and go to sleep. The women tend children, passing out drinks and orange slices to pacify them. The children drink tea out of jars.

Lianfeng has the seat next to the window, and I'm sitting in the middle. He watches out the window. It's his first trip to the city. I don't have enough Chinese, and he doesn't have enough English for us to talk, but the distance between us feels more profound than that. The man sitting across from us leans forward and asks me how old I am.

I tell him twenty-seven, and that I'm American, since that is usually the next question.

He asks me something else. Every trip is like this, a series of questions that would be too personal to ask back home. Fortunately, I can't understand him, so I smile and shrug and say I don't speak much Mandarin. He asks me again, and then smiles at my incomprehension, says "American" in Chinese, and nods.

I glance at Lianfeng, but he is not looking at us. The man asks him something, and Lianfeng answers him reluctantly. The man has found a source of explanation, and Lianfeng is forced to talk. *Daifu,* he explains. American doctor. Albert Schweitzer. Dragging an unwilling boy to Tai'an "for his own good."

Lianfeng is more interested as we pull into Tai'an. It must seem like we go through a lot of city before we get to the train station. What would he think of Beijing? I wonder. Coming into Beijing by train we always pass a big amusement park; ferris wheel, roller coaster, the works. I could take him to a western hotel, buy him a duck dinner in the restaurant near Tiananmen Square, go to the Great Wall. The trip of a lifetime for a peasant boy.

A trip to the Tai'an hospital will have to do. (Unless he is dying, I think, admitting the thought for the first time. If he is dying, I'll take him to Beijing.)

The hospital is as horrible as I remember. Patients sleep in beds covered with quilts and blankets from home. Women bring food—Chinese hospitals don't provide food, although there are vendors who will sell a patient a dinner. The bathroom is not western: a trench in the concrete floor, washed with water and disinfectant. A man crouches in the hall, his IV on a stand. He wears pants and a T-shirt, and has his jacket slung over his shoulders, so that the sleeve doesn't interfere with the tubing in his arm. He's smoking a cigarette and talking to another man, maybe a friend come to visit. They look up in curiosity as we pass.

"Dr. Lambert." My liaison at the Tai'an hospital is a woman, Dr. Yi. She doesn't speak much English. I have a list of instructions carefully written out for me by Xiao Cao. She reads them and nods, smiles at Zhao Lianfeng, and says something reassuring. I sit while she prods and taps and peers and draws blood. He is embarrassed to death by the request for a urine sample.

"Four o'clock," she says when she is finished, pointing to the clock and then holding up four fingers. Test results at four o'clock.

I promise we'll come back. She nods, smiles at me. Then takes my wrist. "TB test?" she says. "You TB test, yes, no?"

"TB test no," I say. "No TB."

Lianfeng is standing there, happy to be wearing a shirt again, but when I say "no" he looks up, hair in his eyes, and cocks his head, as if listening. His eyes drift left, the way people's eyes do when they are thinking of something. It is activity also common in some types of seizure, and he looks so strange that Dr. Yi and I both stop talking. He says something to Dr. Yi.

She answers him, explaining TB, I guess.

"TB *yes*," he says to me.

"TB no," I say, feeling foolish and ungrammatical. We test ourselves for TB every couple of months, except in the summer. I can test myself at the clinic.

Dr. Yi says something to him.

He shakes his head at me, says in Chinese, "They tell me." I can understand what he is saying.

"Who are 'they'?" But either he doesn't understand or won't answer. "TB yes," he says firmly.

What the hell, I dragged Lianfeng all the way here for his tests, the least I can do is let her stick me for TB. And it will empower Lianfeng, give him back some self-respect.

Of course, in this hospital with spittoons in the corners, the TB sticks are modern, Japanese, efficient. By four o'clock, Dr. Yi will tell me what my TB results are. In the clinic, we still use the old serum test with the injection under the skin and the three day wait to see if there's a reaction.

I take Lianfeng shopping. He has a list from his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Prices are too high, he clicks his tongue in disapproval and shakes his head. He buys some tools. The shop girls intimidate him with their ponytails and bracelets of watches (Beijing fashion a year out of date). But he is more himself, animated and full of energy. More energy than I have. It's ironic that he still looks like bone and wire covered in skin and I still have western hips, but he's got twice the energy I do.

He eats pretty well, too. We order half a kilo of dumplings and two dishes of pork and vegetables and a couple of cans of orange soda. He eats three-fourths of it, and even jokes with the waitresses.

Dr. Yi is waiting for us when we get back to the hospital. She is like many doctors with some college training, she reads medical English, and she has copied out test names and test results for me in careful printing. The results make no sense. His white blood count is not high, it's normal. He is negative for hepatitis, TB, and diabetes. His cholesterol count is 66. That's about half mine, and I'm very low. His blood pressure, as I noted, is abnormally low.

She has done a few other tests as well. He is EID positive, of course. I am EID positive, anyone who has ever had the disease is. On the multiphage index, the test of immune capabilities, he scores a chart-shattering thirty-one. The average score in the US is twenty-one, the average score in most Third World countries is around fourteen. On the viral index for a range of cancers, his results are so low that they don't even register. Everybody—*everybody*—has some precancerous cells in their body. If you measure six or below on the scale, that means that a normal immune system is able to handle whatever minor cell breakdown you experience as a result of exposure to sunlight or the normal carcinogens (like coal smoke). Six to ten suggests the need for monitoring, and above ten means that you are either at high risk or already have a malignancy.

"*Shi-haode*," I say, bemused.

He tells me he knows. He is grave.

Then Dr. Yi hands me my test results.

Lianfeng reaches out and takes my wrist. Carefully he says, "Hold on, little brother."

I have TB.

TB is no big deal. I can treat it with antibiotics at the clinic. But it means that I can't work with patients until I've run the treatment course, twenty-one days of antibiotics since I am asymptomatic.

Lianfeng's blood results obsess me. I include them in my monthly report to Geneva. I go through our records until I find a history of the middle-aged woman whose disease went through the Lianfeng cycle in September and who is from Lijiazhuang, and Xiao Cao and I go to see her. She is like Lianfeng was in the first weeks, childish and simple, but I persuade her husband, and the four of us, Mr. Qian, Mrs. Zhang (husbands and wives do not have the same name in China), Xiao Cao, and I take the train to Tai'an, where Mrs. Zhang is given a full blood workup.

Her results are not as good as Lianfeng's, but they are startlingly better than they should be.

"Do you hear whispers?" I ask her through Xiao Cao. She looks at her husband, who is frowning, and leans forward conspiratorially. Like a little girl with a secret, she tells Xiao Cao that "they" upset her husband, so she doesn't speak of them.

Zhao Lianfeng comes to see me on Sunday, his only day off, and I sit with Xiao Cao and question him about how he feels, about the whisperers. They have taught him to think differently, he says. Sometimes now he can see better ways to make things. They have made him smarter. The village has made a contract to sell motor scooter parts to Guangzhou—which we call Canton—because he has figured out ways to make them cheaper.

"Who are they?" I keep asking, but he doesn't know. He can only shrug.

"Where are they?" I ask.

In him. And then, surprisingly, in me. "In Xiao Cao?" I ask.

He shakes his head and then looks thoughtful, eyes to the left, that sudden-struck look he had in the hospital in Tai'an.

"He says not, because of the vaccine," Xiao Cao reports neutrally.

He can understand a little about me, though, because the whisperers are in me, too.

"Can they make me healthier?" I ask.

No, he says, then hesitates. Then firmly, "No, the mold was not right."

I write it all down.

During the day, I write down lists of things I know about EID. Long and obsessive lists, since at first I do not exclude anything. I write down that it killed my uncle and my father, although not my mother or myself (but it is not gender specific, the World Health Organization's statistics have found no correlation between mortality and gender). I tell Terry and Jeff, show them the test results, and we talk about it long into the night.

On the twentieth day of my course of antibiotics, I take the train to Tai'an alone, although Terry and Jeff have given me instructions that I have to call and tell them how things turn out. At the Tai'an Guesthouse, I pay and make a long distance call to Geneva, Switzerland. The only name I know is Dr. Geuter, the name on the address I use to mail my reports, and it takes over an hour of long distance operators and receptionists in Geneva before I finally get to him. When I tell him what I have found, he transfers me yet again, to a woman named Ilse Erandt, who speaks clear English with the almost British accent of some Germans.

She listens as I pour out my theory. Probably, over the years, she has gotten these kinds of calls before, I think. People who think that the plague is from God, or from Venusians, or from the increase of active cultures in our diet from eating yogurt. When I finish, she is silent, and I listen to the crackle of the open line, not as clear as it would be from Beijing. Maybe I've been in China too long, maybe I'm losing my mind.

"When did he come into your clinic?" she asks.

"March," I say.

"That's the earliest case of Windhouk Syndrome so far," she says. And explains that until I called, the earliest case they knew of was from a camp outside Windhouk, Namibia, back in July. That person was killed in a riot. They have hundreds of cases from August, but the survivors are all still childlike.

"March," she says. "I would like to see this young man."

There are dust storms in Beijing. Sand blown in from the Gobi is turning the sky yellow, even at noon. Sandstorms are not like they are in *Lawrence of Arabia*, they are more like a yellow fog. The Chinese call it ghost weather.

The plane climbs above the yellow, rising out of it until the sky is blue and only the land below is stained yellow. From above, there are thin places and thicker, darker places, as the wind moves the sand in currents.

I have been thinking about the whispers.

It's possible that Lianfeng has anthropomorphized the changes the disease has caused. That his mind, in order to cope with his brain and body, has manufactured a "them" that "tells him." But there are two things that keep coming back to me. The first is his insistence that I get a TB test. Maybe it was just a way for him to turn the tables on me because he was angry at me for making him go to the hospital, a kind of "if I have to, you have to" tit-for-tat. But I feel as if he *knew* I was going to test positive. And he said that it was because the whisperers in *me* had told the whisperers in *him.*

Second is something Terry brought up in one of our late-night discussions; the peculiar way that the disease patterns seem to change worldwide, all at once. Lianfeng had the Windhouk Cycle in March, another patient, thousands of miles away in Southern Africa, demonstrated the same symptoms a couple of months later. And when there was an upswing in the disease, it was worldwide. When that happened before, in '98, '02, and again in '07, there were attempts to link the upswing to everything from magnetic storms and sunspots to the greenhouse effect, and on through to astrology.

What if EID is like the sandstorm, not just the grains of sand individually, but the whole? All interconnected. Then it would make sense that, for the whisperers, what happened in Lijiazhuang, China, and what happened just outside Windhouk, Namibia, could be connected. Lianfeng is the first cell to change in a whole *body* that's changing.

He'd told Xiao Cao that the whisperers couldn't improve me because "the mold wasn't right."

If they have got that right, that's going to cause some real change, because, since the US and EC perfected the vaccine in 2010, most of the industrialized countries have been fully vaccinated. And Lianfeng had told Xiao Cao that the whisperers were in Lianfeng, and were in me, but that they weren't in Xiao Cao, because of the vaccine.

All over the world, in places like the outlying suburbs of Mexico City, and Mozambique, and Bolivia, and all the forgotten countries of the world where the vaccine hasn't come, there are lots of people for whom "the mold is right." People who will be healthier, and smarter, and who, like Lianfeng, may be able to improve their village sweatshops. Maybe there is a whole economic miracle about to unfold in the Third World, while the US, locked out by the vaccine, can only watch.

It's only speculation. And it's hard to imagine, watching Lianfeng sleep beside me in his seat.

* * *

Geneva is lightyears—a full century!—away from Beijing, and nothing I have told Lianfeng could possibly have prepared him. He stands in the airport in his new Beijing clothes, looking at the advertisements, the mixture of foreigners, innocent of the West.

Dr. Erandt is a woman my mother's age, wearing a beautiful suit the creamy brown of eggshells. Dr. Erandt's Chinese translator has an earring in his nose. Lianfeng can't stop staring at it (and neither can I). I haven't had a decent haircut in over a year, and I'm still wearing my awful cotton coat from China.

"I am so happy to meet you," Dr. Erandt says, shaking Lianfeng's hand. "You don't have any *idea* how happy I am to meet you."

"Dr. Erandt," I say, "have you ever had EID?"

"No," says Dr. Erandt, "I was lucky."

Lianfeng looks at me. He *couldn't* have understood, I asked in English. But he nods. "*Weiguoren*," he says to me.

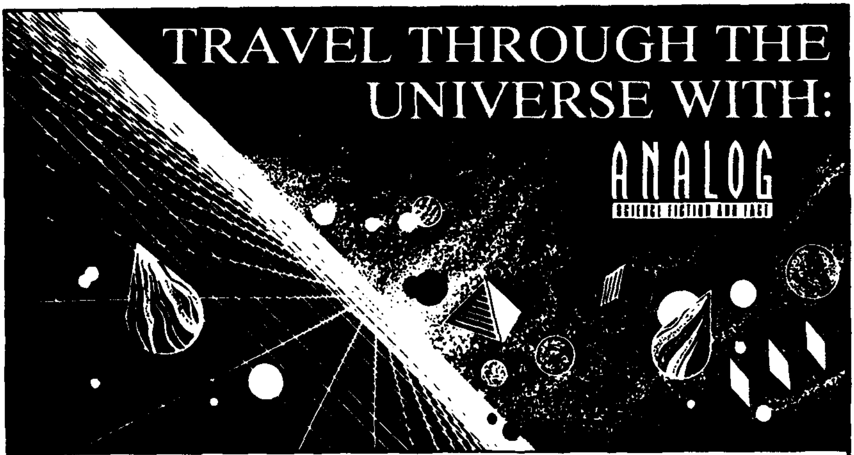
Foreigners. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** returns to these pages next month with another story in her popular Drylands series, our lead story for May, a powerful new novella called "Stairway." The Drylands stories are set in an all-too-probable future American West—a West where the water has finally and irrevocably run out, the aquifers and watertables have run dry, and deserts have eaten the farms and towns and ranches of Oregon and Washington and Montana and Wyoming. Unusually for a Drylands story, the characters in this one spend much of the story surrounded by water—far at sea, aboard a train of icebergs being towed to Los Angeles, a cargo of fresh water worth more than diamonds in this desperately thirsty world. It's a dangerous job and a dangerous journey, but more dangerous than usual for one man aboard, a man without a memory or a past, for whom it's also a journey of discovery—a journey back into a deadly past that he may well be better off not knowing about.... Compelling, fast-paced, inventive, suspenseful, disturbing—this is one you won't want to miss!

ALSO IN MAY: popular new writer **Tony Daniel** takes us to an oddly skewed Alternate World where the Appalachians are taller than the Himalayas, and spins a terrifying story of one man's encounter with the forces behind nature itself, as he struggles to climb the mountain known as "God's Foot";

(Continued on page 318)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Greg Costikyan

THE HART

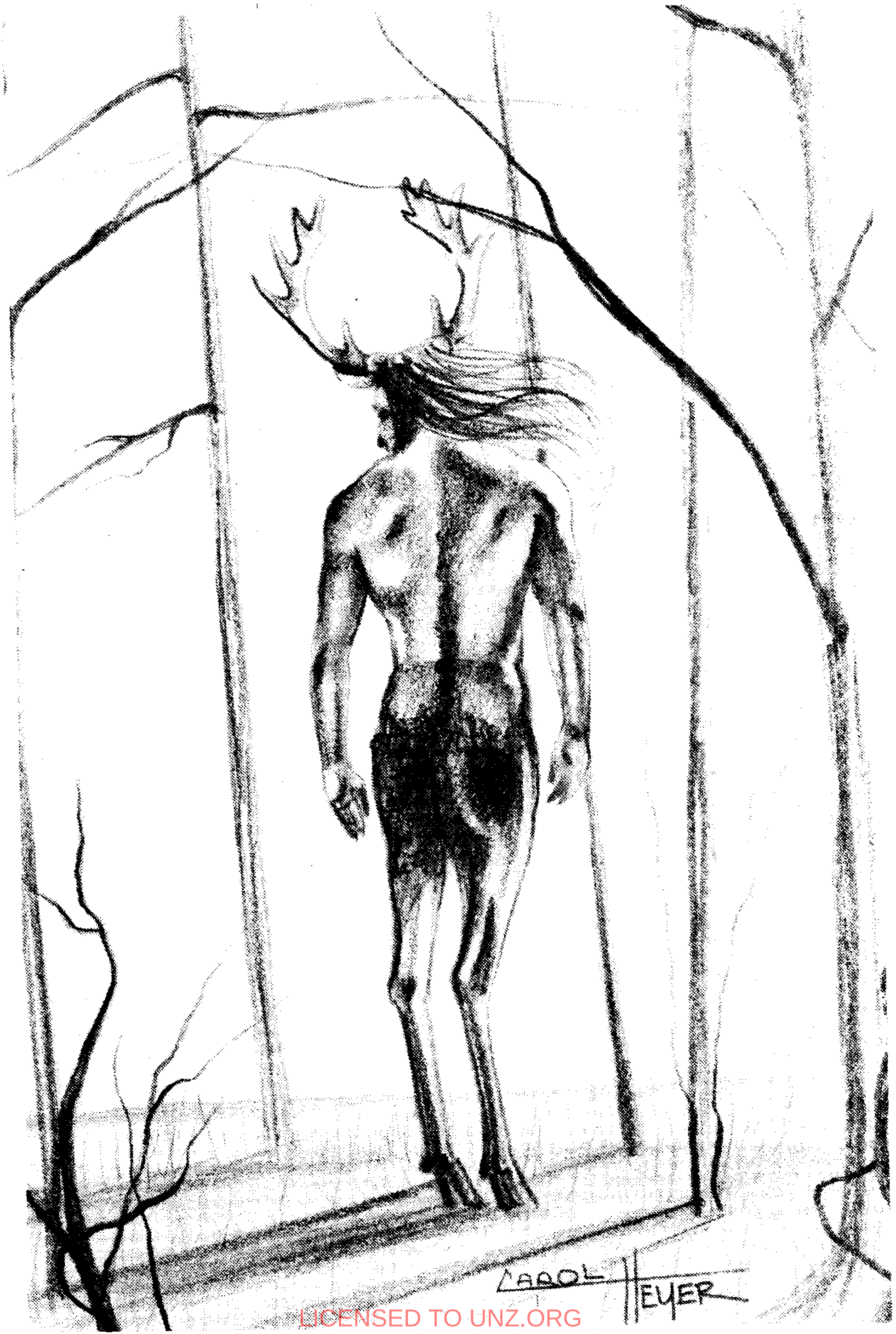
Greg Costikyan is the author of *Another Day, Another Dungeon* (Tor) and *By the Sword*, a fantasy serial appearing on the Prodigy Services computer network. His short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Amazing*, and various other markets. Mr. Costikyan has also designed twenty-three commercially published computer games, five of which received the Origins Award for excellence. The author is currently at work on a humorous SF novel, *Sales Reps from Beyond the Stars*.

art: Carol Heyer

I have a farm on Green Mountain. I keep sheep, mostly; a cow for milk, cats for company, and I plant vegetables for my own table. There's an apple tree out back, which helps out, too. The lambs bring in a little money, and the wool I shear, but it is little more than subsistence farming. The money suffices to keep me going, to buy tools and seed and pay the vet. It is enough.

From my meadow, where the sheep graze, I can see most of the town of Freedom. I watch as the townsfolk file into church on Sunday. I won't have with that sanctimonious crap; I go there only for the bake sales. Every second Tuesday night, they have a Town Meeting in the Town Hall; I don't go there, either. Waste of time. Lot of hot air. I pay my taxes and I don't complain. Ain't that enough?

I can see the village store and the Cities Service pumps Maysmith has out front. I can see the schoolhouse and the bandstand; when they have concerts in the summer, I can sometimes hear snatches of melody wafting my way. I can see the old Elm Tree Inn, now Holmgren's place, cold and shuttered in the winter. I can see the volunteer firehouse, and I know all the alarms by heart: one long two short for Effingham Falls way; two long one short for down by the lake; they have a little printed list you can take home. When there's a fire, I lie abed and count the siren blasts, figuring where the fire roars. If it's in eyeshot, sometimes I go out and see if I can spot it.



CAROL HEYER

Three long is an air raid. Heh. Fat chance Russian bombers'd find anything worth bombing in Carroll County.

I know what they think of me, down there. Oh, they don't say it to my face, but it's easy enough to reckon. Mabel Travers, growing old and strange up there on Green Mountain.

True, I suppose.

Mid-June, I was out in the meadow, dipping the lambs. Hard work. None of them like it, none of them has the sense of a door post, and all are inclined to make a fuss. But they need to be run through the trench; and then, I must force a pellet down every lamb's throat. It's sulphur and arsenic, mostly; a Cooper's tablet. Kills internal parasites. Throws the lambs off their feed for a while too, but can't be helped.

I got one down a throat, holding the muzzle to make sure the lamb swallowed and, for my pains, got a kick in the leg as the creature struggled free. I stood for a while in the sun, resting before the next. Faintly, I heard, "Thump"—and then, "Ally-ally-in-come-free!"

Down there, kids tore across the yard of the Elm Tree Inn. A game; kick the can. I'd played it as a child. The Holmgrens must be up for the summer; they'd opened the house.

Summerfolk. Didn't know what they had. Nice spread of land, the Inn and the hill behind it. Ninety acres, all told, most of it farmland once. Not bottom land, but perfectly sound. Going to rack and ruin, down there, all of it coming up in hemlock and white pine, except for the part they kept mowed as a lawn.

It was happening all over, these days. Truth to tell, these rocky hills hadn't been very good farmland ever, not even back in Puritan times. Nowadays, it was tough to compete with the big farms out west, the big dairies with their automatic milkers, the western sheepherders with their county-sized grazelands. People just stopped farming. Young folk headed for the cities. Summerfolk came and bought up the old houses. And the forests came creeping back.

Not my concern, of course. But if I'd had Holmgren's land, I could have kept another couple hundred sheep.

Not, I thought, rubbing my leg, that I could possibly have cared for another two hundred sheep by myself. The sixty-odd I had were trouble enough.

By four, I was through with the sheep dip. I took my sketch pad and climbed up the mountains, up over the stone fence into what used to be Armor Carter's farm, fifty years gone by. It was forest already, second growth, tall pines, needles carpeting the ground.

I went to a flume I knew, a little stream rushing down the hill. It was still running with melt water and the heavy rains we'd had. By August, it would be dry. But for now, it was a nice little spot, a nice spot for sketching. With the point of the pencil held between thumb and forefinger, the shaft flat against my palm, I laid out the lines of a little pool, a spray of wildflowers behind it, boulders and a runnel of a waterfall.

I caught sight of the stag out of the side of my eye before I heard his quiet, oh so quiet step on the needled earth: a glimpse of antlers.

I turned my head slowly, so as not to startle him. There he was, full seven points, hard to believe a hunter had not bagged him in these woods. . . .

A stag? A face: Not the soft, flat black nose of a deer, a deer's protruding muzzle; but a flat face, covered with soft brown fur, a flat nose, like that of a . . .

He was gone.

Of a man.

Of a man?

Rapidly, I flipped a page in my sketchbook and tried to sketch what I had seen, or thought I had seen. Two feet, not four, but hoofed; full antlers, the brown, white-spotted coat of a deer; a manlike face. . . . Madness, I thought, studying the smudgy image, a poor rendering done in haste. Madness. Poor Mabel Travers, finally gone round the bend, just like they said she would.

Well, I was tired. And in dim light, the eye can play funny tricks. It was an interesting fantasy, if nothing else.

I stoked up the wood stove and heated up some of the leftover stew. Tristam and Yseult twined about my legs, meowing, and holding their tails high; they got stew, too, and a bit of milk. I got a crock of homemade cider out of the shed, then turned on the hurricane lamp. Tristam jumped to my lap, turned around twice, then settled down, purring and kneading my arm with his paws, tiny pinpricks not quite penetrating my heavy shirt. I cast an eye at my stack of books—I wish the library didn't have a four-at-a-time rule, I wind up spending too much money on gas, traveling back and forth to pick up more. The Brontë looked good.

A jug, a cat, and a good book. Life ain't so bad.

The woodpile was getting low. Not for the first time, I considered investing in one of them chainsaw things. Axe and saw work took a lot out of you.

Problem was there wasn't much timber on my land; the sheep kept it cropped pretty close. So I cut wood on Carter's land. Helping them out, really, thinning out the forest, improving the grade of timber. Mark

Carter might not see it like that, though, the horse's ass. And it's kind of hard to cut timber surreptitiously with a chainsaw you can hear from here to Mt. Washington. So off I went into the forest, with a wheelbarrow, an axe, a saw, and a good sharp knife for trimming branches.

Some hours later, I trundled back with a wheelbarrow full of green wood. Someone was sitting in my meadow. Without so much as a by-your-leave, he'd set up an easel on my property; he sat before it on one of those portable stools with a single leg.

Almost, I yelled at him—but the moment of irritation passed and, curious, I came up behind him to see what he was doing. He was so wrapped up in his work that he didn't hear me approaching—or smell me, for that matter; I was pretty rank, after cutting timber most of the day.

He had a piece of parchment tacked up on the easel, and an array of colored pencils nearby; it was a sketch of the town, down below. No doubt he'd come up here for the view. The trees were a mixture of greens and browns, loosely sketched with broad strokes, while the houses were meticulously drawn in sharp black pencil, the colors shaded in as appropriate. I liked the juxtaposition: the somewhat vague trees, the careful detail of the houses. "You're Holmgren," I said. I'd never seen him before, anyway at closer than half a mile, but the man who'd bought the Elm Tree Inn was a professional illustrator; I don't know who else'd want to come up to my spread to draw.

He jumped, but managed to avoid spoiling the drawing with a wild stroke, then peered at me, a little worried, thick glasses over floppy mustache. I put him at, oh, forty. Little older than I.

"Err, yes," he said, taking off his glasses and mopping at his head with a handkerchief. "Is this your property?"

"It is," I said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I'm trespassing. I should have asked you first, but there didn't seem to be anyone. . . ."

"It's all right," I said, somewhat grudgingly. He returned to work. I watched him a little longer—he was roughing in the gas pumps in front of the general store—then said, "I do a little sketching."

Holmgren looked up, suppressed a sigh, then stood and laid the stool aside. "You do," he said with false cheer. "How very interesting." He was as transparent as any man I've ever seen: crazy Mabel Travers thinks she can draw, if he wants to sketch from her meadow he'd better pretend interest. "Do you mind if I take a look?"

His attitude annoyed me, a bit. Yes, I wanted him to take a look, but not if it was a goddamned chore. My fault, of course; I was too damned awkward with people. Probably, if I'd had a fund of small talk and offered him tea, he'd gladly have taken a look. If truth be told, he could sketch from my meadow any damn time he wanted; he drew like an angel. I could learn things just looking over his shoulder. "I'd be pleased," I said, a little irritably, and stamped off toward the house. A fine pair we were, me glum at my own awkwardness, he dreading the need to remark encouragingly on what were no doubt amateurish scribbles.

I pulled back the drapes, found my case, and thrust it at Holmgren, no longer particularly interested in what he had to say. He pulled out one of my pencil sketches and a charcoal or two—and that false politeness went out of his face. He moved toward the window for better light, and began to leaf through my drawings, a decade's handiwork.

"This is good," he said, a note of surprise in his voice. He held up a drawing of the church; it was a swap meet, people moving among tables set out in front of the building. "You could afford to do some figure studies," he said, looking at it again. "Here." He found a blank sheet of paper, and started sketching figures, showing me how to lay out the lines of the human form; fairly obvious stuff, once you saw it. But I was, as he said, "an untutored talent." It caught me by surprise.

We spent the rest of the afternoon browsing through my files. I think I half fell in love with him, then; I can still see his hands, the strong, blunt hands of a workman, moving over a page; that sandy mustache beneath those thick glasses. He smelt faintly of oil paints and pipe tobacco; there were freckles on the backs of his long arms.

The drawing that attracted him the most was that rough sketch I'd made of—whatever it was I'd seen up by the flume. Certainly, it was unlike anything else I'd done. He kept on staring at it, shaking his head slightly, and saying, "Very strange."

"Do you read weird fiction?" he asked.

I could only stare blankly. What?

"Lovecraft? E. R. Eddison? Poe?"

"I've read a little Poe," I said. The other names meant nothing to me.

He let it pass.

I couldn't let it pass, not so easily. I kept wondering just what it was I had seen, up there on the mountain. I cut myself some hemlock branches and built a little blind by the flume. I told myself I was doing it to get a better look at wildlife, for my sketchbook; but in truth, I was hoping that the Hart, as I had begun to call him, would return and that, hidden in my blind, I would not scare him off, as I had before.

Had it merely been a trick of the light? Or had I truly seen something remarkable? It wasn't completely crazy to think so, was it? After all, the forests were returning; they said that moose were becoming more common in the northern part of the state, sometimes wandering as far south as we. People claimed to have seen wolves, although I was skeptical. Who was to say that some rare creature of the woodlands, overlooked or shunned in superstitious fear by the dour, religious folk who'd settled these lands, might not be returning with the trees?

The first part of my plan, at least, worked well. I got several nice sketches of deer drinking at the flume; and once, when I had tarried until sundown, caught a family of raccoons coming out to drink. I took to leaving a sketch pad at the blind—at least when there was no likelihood of rain—to avoid lugging one back and forth.

When I went to the blind one morning, I found something extraordinary; someone had been using my pad. I cursed, thinking it must be one of the local kids; but the drawings that the trespasser had left were not what one would expect. There were no crude obscenities, no airplanes or idle doodles. Instead, there were curiously abstract sketches of animals: deer stumbling in pain, lines slashing across the page as if indicating an explosion—gunfire?; a stylized eagle soaring, a fish in its claws. The style was awkward, primitive; it reminded me of cave paintings or Indian carvings. I turned the page of the pad, and was greeted with newfound shock: a picture of me, undeniably me. There was the blind, a woman's figure crouching within; the face could not be discerned, but there was a curiously sensuous line to the woman's hip. And another; a sheep on the ground, sick or injured, and a woman—again, the face obscured—tending to the animal.

I heard motion where I expected none and, with a sense of eeriness, turned my head to look up the slope. There he was, amid the pines. Liquid brown eyes looked toward me, white antlers among the dead, white lower limbs of the trees; the brown fur of the body blended into the forest floor's brown needle cover. There *were* only two legs, but curious ones, the legs of a deer rather than of a man; the face had the flatness of an ape's, not the protruding muzzle of a beast. The creature's maleness was very evident; I wondered what he could possibly be thinking, whether indeed he possessed any higher degree of mentation than a deer or sheep—and again, he was gone.

My hands shaking, I studied those curious drawings anew. Could the Hart possibly have drawn them? I tried to remember the shape of those hands; were there fingers? Was the thumb opposable? But I could not; I had not noticed much about the forelimbs.

Aghast at my own daring, I began to add new drawings to the pad: the Hart and a woman, sharing a meal; the Hart and a woman, sitting on separate rocks, both intent on pads in their laps; a woman, feeding sheep; a woman, petting a cat. I thanked heaven I had not slain any of the lambs so far this year. Obviously, my treatment of them had somehow impressed the Hart.

And then, too uneasy to stay any longer, I fled down the hill toward my house and the open ground around it.

That whole summer, Holmgren came up every few days to sit in my meadow and draw. He always took time to look through my most recent sketches, and offer some advice. My drawing progressed rapidly; by the end of June, everything I'd done previously looked primitive to me. It was like a whole world had opened up; I wished I'd found some way to learn this before.

I used to drive down to town every week or two in my old Ford truck, to pick up some essentials at the village store. I'd stop in at the post office, not that I got much mail, and at the library, to pick up some new books. I was browsing through the section on zoology, looking for references to give me a better idea of the musculature of some of the animals I was drawing, when I heard two women gossiping in the next aisle over. "I can't imagine what he sees in her," said Maizie Maysmith, the storekeeper's wife.

"True enough," said Janet Carter. "A less attractive woman I can't think." That was her problem; she *couldn't* think. Janet was an idiot when we went to school together, and marriage and kids hadn't made her any smarter.

"The one I feel sorry for is his wife," said Maizie. "She has to know, with him up there on the mountain and all."

"And such a little doll she is, too," said Janet. "Why in God's name would he want Mabel Travers when he's got her?"

It had already dawned on me that they were talking about Holmgren and me, of course. I couldn't stop myself from bursting into laughter.

"Who's that?" said Janet.

"You're a silly bitch, Janet Carter," I said through the books, "if you think I'm sleeping with John Holmgren."

And then I flounced out of there.

Why hadn't I realized we'd be the cause of gossip? We made no effort to keep our meetings secret; half the town could see Holmgren climbing Green Mountain with his easel and his stool. I guess I'm just not very sensible about such things.

I wouldn't have minded, you understand. Holmgren was the smartest, most interesting man I had ever met. If I hadn't been so damned awkward myself, I might have entertained such thoughts. Or perhaps not; the visibility of the hill goes both ways. I could see his wife, if only as a shapeless blur, standing on the porch and calling to the children, and his two girls tearing about the yard with the neighbor's kids. Under the circumstances, how could you think about adultery?

I wouldn't have minded scandal if it were true; I'd rather be a scarlet woman than an eccentric old maid. But it was maddening to be accused of something you hadn't done.

I didn't give a fig for what the town of Freedom thought of me; but Holmgren had to live among them, for half the year at least. I worried for him, as I wrestled my truck up the dirt road to my farm.

Next Sunday, I began to cull the lambs. Half were male, and I could not possibly keep so many rams: they fight over the ewes, and need to be pastured separately. Usually, I castrate most of the males; wethers produce wool as well as any other sheep. But mindful of the Hart, I did not want to perform so brutal an alteration, out here in the open where he might see. Nor did I want to slay the lambs, though I could use some meat. Instead, I would sell them to a meat dealer in Conway; he could do the dirty deed. I felt a little guilty at the deception, but not greatly so; what else was I to do? I shut the lambs I planned to sell into one pasture, then put my pencils, a quick lunch of fruit, and a pad into a basket, and went up the mountain.

When I got to the blind, there was a curiously earthy smell; at first, I could not place it, but then discovered a damp spot to one side of my hiding place. It was urine; some animal had marked my blind.

Some animal? Or perhaps the Hart? Had he claimed it as his own, as a cat claims its hunting territory by marking its perimeter with urine? I felt a shiver, realizing anew that whatever I was dealing with, it was not human.

I went into the blind to retrieve my sketch pad, and studied it to see if the Hart had left more drawings; but he had not. So I went out and sat on a rock by the stream, hoping he would appear. I passed the time by sketching the flume. Summer was wearing on, and the flow of water was diminishing, but it was still a charming little brook.

I did several sketches that afternoon, shifting uneasily from one spot near the flume to another; I kept sneaking glances at the woods, in the hope that my shy admirer might appear. I stayed until twilight, until it became so dark that it was difficult to see the page on which I drew. At last I sighed, giving up hope; he was not coming. I began to pack up my things.

I turned toward the stone wall that paralleled the stream, back down the hill toward my farm. It wasn't there.

For a moment, this fact simply didn't register; then, I walked to where I had *known* the wall to be, and saw—nothing. Needle cover.

That was flatly impossible. Why, that wall must have been there for two hundred years. Whenever a farmer ran into a rock, in this rocky soil, he'd haul it off and pile it onto his wall, marking the property line and improving his soil simultaneously. Armor-of-God Carter's great grandfather must have started that wall.

I felt a chill. It was nearly full dark now; I had stayed so late, counting on the wall to be there, figuring I could not lose my way in the dark if only I followed it.

I started down the hill. The bottom third of the slope was bracken and juniper—clear enough that I'd be able to see the town, once I came to the forest edge. If I didn't come out on my land, I'd come out on Holmgren's or someone's, and I'd be able to find my way home from there.

It took longer to find the forest edge than I had expected; but at last, I saw open ground before me, and hastened my pace.

I expected to see Freedom spread out below me: the street light in front of the post office and the one in front of the general store; the lights of the houses, perhaps a headlight or two moving down the road.

I didn't. The clearing was—a clearing. Probably, there had been a fire here, not too many years before. Beyond it was—more forest.

I looked up at the skies and, worried now, tried to fix my position. Freedom was east of me. Even if I'd strayed far from it, head east and I'd hit the highway. I looked at the sky; there was Perseus, Draco, Ursa Major. . . . From the Big Dipper, you follow the two stars of the edge of the Dipper toward Polaris, the North Star. . . .

Where was Polaris?

What was happening to me?

Wait a minute—I remembered something. The stars move in the sky, but very slowly, slowly enough that a person wouldn't notice the change in a single lifetime. But Polaris's angular motion was rather high; a few thousand years ago, it hadn't been the North Star. It had been somewhere else in the sky.

This was madness. No stone wall; no town, no North Star . . . hah. Mabel Travers, gone round the bend at last.

There was a trumpet from the edge of the clearing. I nearly leapt out of my skin. Crashing toward me, through the bushes, was a monster, a creature like none—

Something was riding it. There was silver, above the monster's back; glowing silver light. Antlers in the sky, a silver nimbus. . . .

It was Hart. But this, too, was madness; that glow, that magical glow. . . . I searched for explanations. Bioluminescence? Deer didn't glow, goddamn it. But it was Hart, and so I did not flee as the monster approached.

Its shoulders were above my head. It was the largest beast I'd ever seen, larger than elephants at the zoo—although as it neared, I saw it was quite elephantine. It had a trunk, four broad legs, mighty tusks; a mastodon. Or perhaps a mammoth; I'd never been clear on the distinction.

Okay, fine, thought I. We're in the Pleistocene. Sure. Why not? I wonder how the sheep will manage, now that their protector is a madwoman.

With a snort, the mammoth stopped before me, then knelt on its forelegs. Hart reached down a hand.

A hand? No human hand. Imagine that a cloven hoof can separate, producing two long fingers ending in hardness; and that the vestigial toe of a horse or deer, that in such animals is evident only as a bump at the back of the leg, has instead moved forward and become a true digit, opposing the hoof-like fingers. He had not the five fingers of a human, but three; and while they were not as flexible as human digits, they sufficed to let him grab my arm, pull me atop the mastodon with him.

In silence unbroken save by the sounds of the mastodon's motion, we moved off, at a rocking gait, off into the primeval wood, ancient stars above our heads.

How can I recount that night? It was as if a dream; it must have been a dream. We moved through the woods, across great plains where bison in the thousands grazed and nodded in slumber. At last, we came to a cliff; I do not know where it can have been, though the land about us was lush with vegetation. Before it, there was an encampment of men and women; I thought of them as Indians, for they had Mongoloid features, but their huts and garments looked like nothing from any Indian culture of which I was aware. Not the Pleistocene, obviously; how late did mammoth live, after the arrival of the Indians? I had no idea; it was not a period I knew much about.

Against the cliff, a curiously sheer sheet of limestone, were painted great murals. The style was unmistakably Hart's.

He was greeted with great respect by the people of the camp; they seemed incurious at my presence. Several men I took to be shamans escorted us to the cliff base.

Pictures of animals; in flight, fighting, in repose. Many showed hunters pursuing. They were large; many figures were yards across. And all had the freshness, the emotion that I had seen in Hart's drawings.

There was a curious imagery in action; I suspected a sacramental purpose for these, and wondered if they were intended to propitiate the spirits of the prey, or bring the hunters good luck, or . . . But I was thinking of them as if they were the product of this primitive, human culture; they were the product of Hart, were they not? Hart, who glowed impossibly silver here, who had transported me ten thousand years in time? What could his motives possibly be?

There was scaffolding against one section of the cliff—an unpainted section. Hart and I climbed it. He had difficulty, and no wonder; humans, at least, have arboreal creatures in our ancestry. Hooves are not well-adapted to climbing. The shamans climbed with him, and steadied him as required.

Hart began to paint. He painted—a dead doe, by the side of a road, the tail of a car disappearing down the highway: a road kill. I wondered what the Indians made of it.

He handed me the brush. The hairs of some animal, bundled together; crude, but serviceable. The shamans bore leather pouches of pigment; ochre, black, white, reddish-brown. The palate was limited.

Hesitantly, I began to paint.

All my previous work had been pencils, charcoals, occasional inks. In my dream, I painted my first painting on a limestone cliff, under pre-Columbian skies, in the wilderness that was North America.

The rest of the night, I have only in bits and snatches; dreams are often only partly remembered. I remember riding back, with the mammoth, Hart's warm, befurred arm tightly about my waist, my head cradled on his chest. I remember lying in the meadow, in Hart's arms, the eastern horizon beginning to lighten. I remember—things I can scarcely credit.

Dreams can be powerful things.

I opened gummy eyes into bright daylight; I had overslept. Outside my house, sheep baa'ed insistently. I shook my head to shake out the fuzziness within, and wondered at my own mental state. Certainly, the Hart was like something out of a distant past; no doubt, that was why my subconscious had chosen to place him there. Still, the dream had been so vivid; I shivered at its oddness.

It must have been a dream. Must it not? But if it truly were a dream, why was it that I had no memory of returning down Green Mountain, from my blind to my house—and no memory of going to bed?

That summer was the happiest of my life, in a way. Holmgren came up every few days, and under his instruction, I felt my mastery of the art grow. I never showed him Hart's drawings, but did show him my attempts to imitate Hart's style. Holmgren was impressed. "This is very interesting," he said. "I've never seen anyone draw in quite this way. It reminds me of the Lascaux cave paintings"—and he brought me a book, to show me what he meant. "You're developing a very distinctive style," he said.

All summer, I was—not so much plagued, as entranced—by dreams of

Hart. They were enormously varied; he seemed to take me to all times and places, at least all places in America. We stood and watched the Pacific Ocean, watched people till the fields around California missions, saw Freedom as it once had been—harsh men in black, women in long dresses, wrestling a hard living from the rocky soil. Often, we returned to the cliff face, and added new paintings to the ones that were there. In a single night, it seemed, we went to the harbor of New York, the waters of the Great Lakes, the coast of California. I would have wondered at his ability to take us so far in so short a time—but anything is possible, in a dream.

I went to the blind to draw, occasionally; but I never saw Hart, waking, again. I began to wonder whether I had ever seen him in truth, or if this all were the consequence of an overactive imagination.

Regarding Holmgren's blunt hands, the tendons in his neck, I felt a great tenderness for him. I felt that I might as well be hanged for a goat as a sheep; if the townsfolk thought me an adulteress, what was to stop me from becoming one? And those strange dreams were rousing odd passions within me.

It was a warm, hazy summer; it rained quite often, great crashing gouts of water pouring from the sky, lightning slashing earthward. The sheep hardly seemed to mind; the lanolin in their wool sheds water quite effectively. I don't mind warm rain myself, though I disliked the mud to which their hooves churned the meadow.

It was on a drizzly morning that I first fell sick. I dragged myself to the doorway before vomiting into the dirt; better out there, in the rain, than inside my house. Not much came up; I hadn't eaten since the night before. I was miserable—but curiously ravenous.

After I had a little food in my stomach, I felt better. Indeed, so much better that I went out to tend to the sheep—not that there was much to do, in the summer. My pasturage was almost enough for sixty head; I needed to supplement their diet a bit with oats, and check them for parasites, but that was all.

The second morning, the sickness recurred. I began to fear the worst; but when it happened on the third morning in a row, I knew it was true. I was pregnant.

The third morning was clear, for the first time in several days. Holmgren came cheerfully up the hill, a case full of oils in one hand and his easel over his shoulder. "Good morning, Mabel," he bellowed from some distance away.

I steeled myself to face him. "Get off my land," I told him.

He blinked behind those heavy lenses. "I'm sorry, Mabel," he said. "Is there some problem? Have I done something to offend you?"

I grimaced, and put on my best dour, New Hampshire face. "I don't care to discuss it," I said. "Just get off, and stay off. I don't care to see you again."

It was clear he was shocked; shocked, put out, and a little dismayed. He must have known the town thought I was a half-mad recluse, and such behavior from a recluse was not unexpected. Still, we had been intimate for weeks.

I turned, and resolutely marched into my house, then closed the door.

"But Mabel . . . ," he called. For some moments, he shifted from one foot to another, wondering what to do; then turned and, shaking his head, made his way back down Green Mountain.

It was for his own damn good. It wouldn't be long before I began to show. If the folks in town found out—they'd never stand for it. They barely tolerated summer folk as it was; they'd ostracize him. It would be unpleasant.

And his wife would learn, of course. New York has different standards from New Hampshire, but even so, I doubted his marriage would survive.

Best not to let anyone know.

So began a long, unhappy time. With Holmgren's absence, I realized how much I had come to depend on him. I had lost the habit of solitude, and it was hard work to recover it, with morning sickness and the sick knowledge of what was coming. At the end of August, he closed up the house, and he and his family drove home to New York in their Ford roadster.

By September, the morning sickness had passed. I was beginning to bulge, but could still hide it, with voluminous clothes; it was time to lay in stores.

I emptied my cash box of its meager hoard, drove into Conway, and spent most of it, on canned goods, dried beans, salamis and hams that would keep, on root vegetables I could store in the cellar. I knew I would be unable to cut wood throughout the winter; log-splitting is no job for a gravid woman. So I did what I had never done before: I had several cords of wood delivered to the house. And I laid in oats and forage for the sheep.

And then, I became a recluse in truth. No more visits to the town; no post office, no general store, no library. My belly was increasingly obvious, bulging out like a great melon, my own flesh turning hard and strange under my hands. In some ways, it was less difficult for me than it must be for other women; I had never cared much for my looks, and the strangeness of my own body was not as disturbing as it might have been. Still, I was far from comfortable; I tired easily, and could not stay on my feet for long.

In October, I felt the baby move for the very first time. How odd, how strange, to feel life inside you like that. It happened when I was out, giving the sheep their feed; I had to pause, and feel my side. In that moment, I felt a rush of emotion; for the first time, I thought of the baby not as a burden to be endured, but as a little creature, a creature that would need my love: a baby, a child, *my* child. I leant against a post, my hand against my stomach for a long, long time.

The weather grew colder. The first snow hit Thanksgiving weekend. Below, the houses glowed with warmth and family comfort; I found myself weeping uncontrollably, something I hadn't done since childhood. The pregnancy was changing my mental state as well as my physique. God, I thought; how dare I, so awkward, so socially impoverished, how dare I bear a child? Would kind of a parent could I possibly be?

By December, I dared not leave the house, save at dark or in dim light. I dressed in heavy clothes to hide my bulk as best I might, and otherwise trusted to darkness and distance to hide the fact of my pregnancy from the town below. The sheep got used to this regime, and began to expect their feed at dawn and dusk; and I became used to the midnight hours, spending most of the days asleep. It helped that the days were short, in the wintertime.

My dreams of the Hart became rarer. Somehow, in my dreams, I was always pregnant; wasn't that strange? You'd think the dreaming mind would forget that for a moment, allow you to think of yourself in your normal shape. Hart was always gentle; he was obviously aware and careful of my condition. The world we entered together, too, reflected the conditions of the waking world; it was wintertime, in that ancient place—and nighttime, always nighttime. Perhaps that was why I dreamed of him less; I was sleeping so much in the day.

January. The solitude became more than I could bear. Even the books that had always been my refuge were denied me; I had read and reread my few paperbacks over and over again, and could not visit the library in my cumbrous state. I, who had always lived alone, began to pine for the simple sight of another human; and the nights were dull indeed, without the company of the printed word.

One morning, long before the dawn, I fired up the truck, and drove it to Portland—far enough away, I hoped, that no one from home would see me. I wore the ring that had been my mother's, lest the folk think ill of me; and I took what remained of my cash. I plundered the used bookstores, and splurged on a restaurant meal; my god, fresh vegetables! Fish! Meat that wasn't lamb! I wandered the town, not knowing quite what to do, until long after nightfall; I could not return to Freedom while folk might be about, to spot me in the cab of my truck.

By February, I was heartily sick of my condition—and of the winter, too. February is the dreariest month of the year. The early winter is a novelty, with its crisp cold and the beauty of the snow; by March, the snow begins to thaw, and the first signs of returning life appear; but February is empty, cold, dismal, and dark, the days so very short. It was far worse for me, now. I felt like a mobile lump, a mere appendage to huge stomach and swollen breasts. No position in my narrow bed was comfortable; it was simply impossible to sleep on stomach or back, and neither side was much better. I slept only in snatches, and was always exhausted. Too, the baby pressed on my bladder, and I was forced to urinate at frequent intervals. I took to keeping a chamber pot indoors, so that I needn't venture out in the day.

On March 27th, in the early morning, I got a stomach ache; gas pains, it felt like. I mixed a spoonful of baking soda in a cup of water and drank it, but it had no effect.

It wasn't until three hours later that I realized that the pain was coming in waves. How could I have failed to realize that I was in labor? The mind is so strange, sometimes.

I hobbled out, and gave the sheep their evening feed, only hours after the morning meal. They were confused, but I had no way of knowing when I could feed them next. The pain was coming in waves now; it was already quite awful, and I could hardly imagine what it would be like in the hours to come.

I went inside, boiled water, and prepared a sharp knife for the umbilical. What else could I do? I got out clean rags, and put my raincoat underneath the sheet on the bed; I knew I'd probably befoul the sheets, but hoped at least to spare the mattress. I managed to choke down a snack and some water between contractions—and then, their intensity ratcheted up a notch.

I felt liquid gushing down my leg; my water had broken. Those rags came in handy.

I could not keep still. Sitting through a contraction was more than I could bear. I stumbled around the room, wandering aimlessly in circles, pausing to squat and groan with each wave. This must have gone on for hours, though I lost track of time. The world focused down within my skull, until only my body, the pain, the room through which I stumbled existed any more. I was barely a sapient creature, at this point; the constant trickle of thought that we think of as ourselves continued in me, but only barely. The vast bulk of my awareness was an animal one, concentrating on necessity and pain.

Just when I thought it could not possibly get worse, it did. Instinctively, I squatted and panted through the wave. And the next. I felt as if I had an enormous need to defecate, and bore down, bore down, bore down; I could feel the head through my vagina, I realized. The pain receded for a moment; and then, it swelled again. I pushed, pushed using muscles in places where I hadn't realized muscles existed.

Somehow, I found myself lying on my side, on my rag rug. The baby was in my arms. There was blood and gunk all over her; she seemed to be gasping, but made no sound. I put a finger in her mouth, and scooped out stuff that felt like mucous; was she having trouble breathing because of this? I put my mouth to her nose and sucked; Christ, it tasted foul, but that did the trick. She started squalling, limbs moving aimlessly.

The umbilical pulsated slowly. I needed to do something about that. I was exhausted, I felt as if I'd been split open and eviscerated like a carcass being prepared by a butcher, but somehow I managed to find the knife I'd sharpened, then cut and tie the cord.

We lay there for long moments, the child and I. I put her to the breast, and that little mouth sucked, but I was not yet lactating. I wondered how long that would take—not too long, I supposed, or humanity would never have survived.

Some minutes later, the afterbirth emerged, a disgusting mass to join the mess on my floor. I doubt I'll ever get all those stains out of my rugs.

The sun is rising, now, an orange orb off Maine way. The snow that carpets the earth is orange, too, reflecting its fire. It is Sunday; in moments, the church bell will ring, and the people will gather for the service. Life goes on as before, down there in town.

Holmgren is in New York for the winter, with his enviable wife and his children; I picture him over a drafting table, working on an ad for Folger's, or Cities Service; gas pumps in front of Maysmith's store. He works on, oblivious to this all.

Out there, somewhere, is Hart. Perhaps I shall see him again. Do I want to? Perhaps it would be better if I did not, if these—dreams, if they are such, if these dreams were to end forever.

You lie in my bed, my darling; I have no money for a proper crib, you will have to sleep with your mama. Oh, my child, what I am to do with you? You, with your so-blue eyes, your chubby hands, your feet with their tiny, perfect hooves? ●

AFTER TWO WEEKS OF DELAYS ABOVE NOVO BRASIL

Your *obrigado* is a threat, Senhor.
"Come back," you say, "venha, venha aqui
Outra vez"—for what? For bacalhada
Made with five-eyed fish heads? Feijoada
Filled with cloned pigs' tails and feet? This station
Has other eateries, Senhor, other
Places that can make me sick on cheap crap
While I'm stuck waiting for some bureaucrat
To sign papers that let me haul your junk
To Earth. Oh? I found a pig's tail and feet
In last Wednesday's almoço—the tail
Four inches thick and all white fat, Senhor,
Genetically deformed, and the small feet:
That pig couldn't walk. Your geneticists
Designed it to roll around in a cage
And gorge itself on the piss
And plastic and paper its
Altered metabolism
Craved. Get meat from trash, Senhor,
Is that it? No. Get meat that tastes like trash,

Get pigs more grub than pig. I threw those feet
To your three-legged dog. He choked them down, fast.
You didn't watch. You thought I ate that "meat,"
Never looking for the bones. Waste nothing!
It must have pleased your stingy, one-eyed soul
To cut that tail from the pig's red corpse—
I hear your, "waste nada Deus me deu,"
See you squeeze the bloody flesh meant only
For me—for your "rich" Americano.
May Deus give you all pig's tails, Senhor,
But nada, nada will you get from me,
Not after today's fine bacalhada:
Fish heads—olha aqui—no meat, just heads:
You gave me alien five-eyed fish heads
Over rice. Your dog smelled this and limped off.
I'm leaving, too. Tchau, Senhor.
I'll eat at *Black Maria's*—
Stomp her baratas, not yours.
Cloned pig's tail! Five-eyed fish heads!
But nada, Senhor, nada mais de mim!

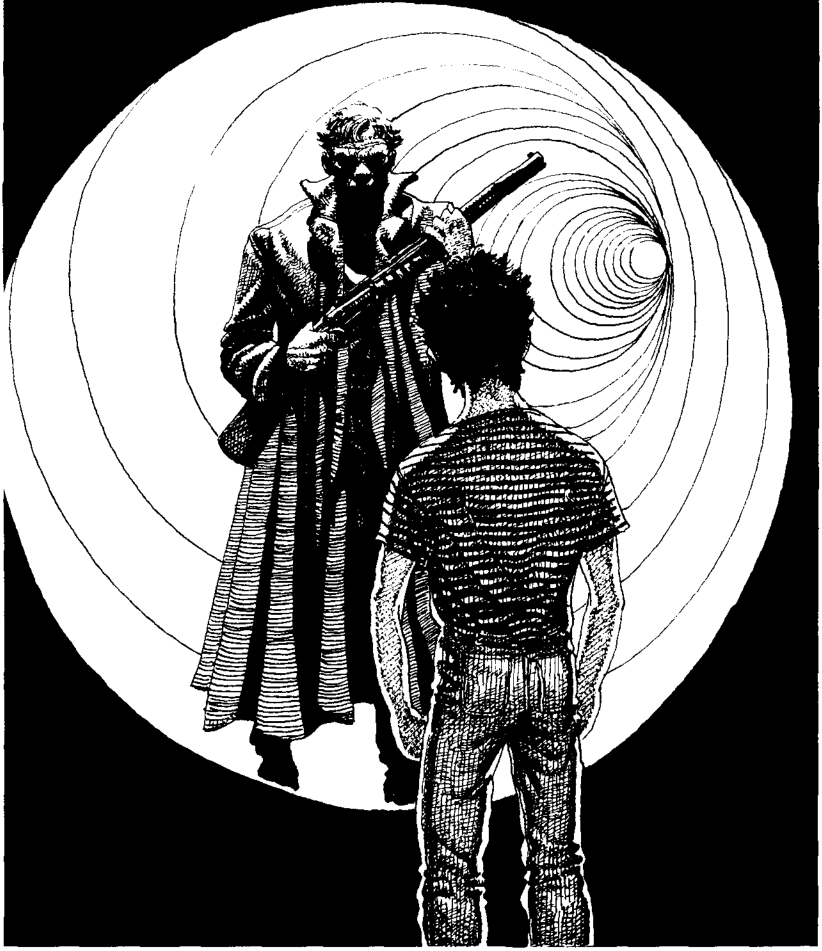
—M. Shayne Bell

Lawrence Watt-Evans

THE MURDERER

The author hopes to get more writing done now that his younger child has started first grade. Del Rey will publish the first volume of his "Three Worlds" science fiction trilogy, *Out of This World*, in November, and this summer, Tor Books will release a hardcover edition of *Split Heirs*—a novel he wrote in collaboration with Esther M. Friesner.

art: Janet Aulisio



Jacob Stein stared at his client in bafflement. "Don't you *want* to be acquitted?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," the man said, smiling. "It's a relief, really, to have it over. And I did far more than I could ever have hoped. I never thought I'd be here this long." The smile faded slightly. "Though I can't say everything worked out the way I expected it to."

"You didn't expect to get caught?"

"No, no—I was pretty sure I'd be caught eventually. I mean the rest of it." The smile was back—a gentle, kind smile, directed entirely at Stein. "You don't understand what I'm talking about, of course," he said. "There's no way you could."

"Well, explain it to me, then." Stein tapped a No. 2 Ticonderoga on the tabletop.

"I honestly don't know if I can." The accused considered, then shook his head. "I don't think I even want to try."

"Well, how am I supposed to help you, if you won't explain anything?" Stein demanded.

"Oh, probably you'd best just plead me insane—I think I'd prefer an asylum to prison."

"Don't forget Old Sparky, Mr. Jones—if we don't show insanity or mitigating circumstances, you'll get the chair."

"You think so?" The smile was uncertain now. "That would be a bad way to go."

"Well, it's the way you'll go, if you don't help me."

"I'm an old man," Jones protested. "Would they really give me the chair?"

"You bet they would, if you don't give me something to work with, to keep you out of it. You killed a *kid*, Mr. Jones—judges and juries don't like that."

"I killed a monster, Mr. Stein. In fact, I've killed a *lot* of monsters over the past seventy years."

"I saw the photos, Mr. Jones—I didn't see the body, but I saw the photos. He looked like a kid to me."

Jones shook his head. "He was a monster. Most of them were. Some were just wrong-headed—maybe I deserve to die for those, but not for him."

Stein tried to hide his reaction. He *had* seen the photos; young Ted had been a good-looking boy, before Jones put a dose of buckshot through his face. If anyone involved in this case was a monster, Stein was very much afraid it was his client, not the victim.

"I think we'd better plead insanity," Stein said.

"If you like," Jones agreed. "In a way, maybe I *am* insane."

Stein snapped his pencil angrily. "You're not very convincing," he said. "Sitting there calmly agreeing isn't going to look very crazy to a jury."

"All right, then; what would you like me to say?"

Stein threw the eraser end of the pencil across the room. "Why don't we start with the *truth*, then?"

Jones nodded. "All right," he said. "All I have to do for a plea of insanity is tell the truth, I suppose. To begin at the beginning, I was born in 1998. . . ." He paused, as if waiting for something.

Stein blinked. "You look a little older than that," he remarked.

Jones smiled again, that gentle, maddening smile. "No, no, Mr. Stein," he said. "*Nineteen* ninety-eight."

Stein threw the other half of the pencil. "What, you were born in the future? You're living backward, like T.H. White's Merlin?"

"Wrong author," Jones replied. "Try H.G. Wells."

"You're a Martian?"

Jones shook his head. "A time traveler."

"Oh, I see, you're from the future?" Stein made no attempt to hide his sarcasm.

"That's right."

"All right, get on with it, then," Stein said. "Let's hear the story."

"It's simple enough. In 2020 I was a first-year grad student at Berkeley, and someone in the physics department thought he'd invented a time machine. I don't know anything about how it worked—he didn't want me to, because he was worried about how I might affect the past if I knew how to build a time machine once I got back there. He was afraid I'd tell someone, and change the history of science." Jones' mouth twisted wryly. "What a fool."

"So you were one of his students?"

"Me? Oh, hell, no—I was a grad student in *history*, not physics! And this physics guy advertised for a volunteer, 'some knowledge of history useful,' and I was bored and could use the hundred bucks he was offering, so I checked it out, and next thing I knew I was in 1892."

"Seventy years ago," Stein said.

"That's right. Seventy years ago. I don't think he had the machine calibrated very well yet; I can't imagine why he'd pick 1892. But there I was—still in Berkeley, I didn't move at all except in time. So I looked around, and then I went down across the bay to San Francisco—I couldn't resist seeing San Francisco before the Quake of 1906! I was a historian, or I wanted to be, anyway, and the early twentieth century was my specialty—I couldn't pass up a chance like that, and I don't care *how* worried the professor was about my interfering with the past. I had a gadget with me that was supposed to send me home again, and it would go off automatically after forty-eight hours, or I could hit a panic button any time before that, so I figured I was safe enough, even if I did look really weird there, dressed the way I was, talking the way I did. I had a bunch of old money we'd bought from a collectors' shop, so I could buy food and souvenirs, and I picked up a lovely old Colt revolver—well, it's old now, it was brand-new then."

Stein shifted in his seat. "Do you expect me to take any of this seriously, Mr. Jones?"

Jones shrugged. "I don't much care."

Stein stared at him for a moment. "Go on, then," he said.

"Well, as I said, there I was in San Francisco, in 1892, and it was just so amazing that I was wandering the streets in a daze. I had the gun I'd bought, so no one was bothering me, and then it happened—I saw William Randolph Hearst coming out of the *Examiner* building, I knew him from the old pictures, and I heard his name, so there wasn't any doubt, and I couldn't resist. It was such an incredible stroke of luck. I mean, it didn't all seem entirely real to me, any of it, if you see what I mean—I couldn't *really* be in 1892, could I? I wasn't thinking about him as if he were a real person, or as if I could be in any danger. Instead I was thinking about the Spanish-American War, and all those scandals, all the lives he ruined, and I couldn't help it. It was such an opportunity, it was like a miracle. I pulled out the gun I'd just bought, and I shot him dead."

"Shot who?" Stein asked, shocked.

"Hearst," Jones answered. "William Randolph Hearst."

"Who's he?" Stein knew it was a stupid question before the words were even out of his mouth, but he had been caught off guard. He had known he was dealing with a murderer, with a crazy old man who had shot a kid without warning, for no reason, but he hadn't expected a confession of another murder, seventy years before.

Jones smiled a smile that the horrified Stein couldn't interpret as anything but pure joy.

"Nobody," Jones said. "Not any more. He was a millionaire's son who ran a newspaper. But now he's nobody."

"Because you shot him."

"That's right," Jones said. "Right there on the street. And when I saw the blood and saw him fall, all of a sudden everything seemed real again, and I turned and ran, and I got away—I'm not sure how. And I pushed the panic button, but nothing happened. I figured it was because I was in the wrong place, so I went back out to Berkeley, to the exact same place that the physics building would be in 2020, and I pushed the button again, and *still* nothing happened. So I waited for the two days to be up, and nothing happened, so I threw the gadget away. And I realized what had happened—I'd changed the past, so the future I came from wasn't there any more. I couldn't go back to it, because it wasn't there."

Stein asked, "Then how could you have come from it?"

"Because it would have been there if I hadn't," Jones said.

"But . . . no, never mind. So you're telling me you shot this Hearst character back in 1892?" Stein tried to collect his scattered thoughts. "What does this have to do with the kid?"

"Nothing," Jones admitted, "Except that it explains why I'm here."

"Because if you hadn't shot him, you'd be back in the twenty-first century?"

"Right."

"I don't think the jury will buy that," Stein said.

Jones shrugged. "No. They'll think I'm nuts."

"Is that it? You're confessing to murdering this Hearst person so they'll think you're crazy? Do you think that's going to work?"

Jones shrugged again. "Would it help if there were other killings?" he asked. "I don't like to call them murders."

Stein stared at him for a long moment. "*Were* there others?" he asked, uneasily.

"Oh, yes," Jones said, smiling. "Lots of them. Adolf Hitler—I'm proudest of that one, of course. I got Goering and Goebbels, too, just to be sure. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Josef Dzhugashvili—he wasn't even calling himself Stalin yet, but I found him. Rasputin—he was hard to kill, just like the stories said. Gavrilo Princip, though all that did was put it off a few years. Mao Tse-tung, of course. Albert Fish—that's a smaller scale, but I thought it was worth doing. I wish I'd got him sooner, but he was hard to find. I got H.H. Holmes as quickly as I could, but of course, he'd got a good start long before I got there—he was the second one, I went after him almost as soon as I realized what I'd done. The last one I went after was Idi Amin, but I couldn't find him at all—but maybe that's all right, the way things have turned out." He shrugged again.

"You know all their names," Stein said.

"Well, of course," Jones said, startled. "None of these were random, you know. I went to a lot of trouble to hunt down the right men."

"They were all men?"

Jones shrugged. "That's the way history is, I guess; yes, they were all men or boys. I suppose I could have gone after Jiang Qing, but without Mao, why bother?"

"You killed them all?"

Jones nodded proudly. "Every one."

Stein tried to think of a sane response to this ghastly boast. "A lot of foreign names there," he remarked weakly.

"All over the world," Jones agreed. "I've traveled a lot."

"I don't understand, Mr. Jones; why'd you kill them? Why these particular people?"

"Because I knew what they'd do if I didn't, Mr. Stein—at least, at first I did."

"At first?"

"That's right," Jones said. "When the Spanish-American War didn't happen on schedule, I was so pleased—I was living off a couple of patents I'd sold to Edison, you understand, they'd been a lot harder than I expected but I had plenty of money, and I'd been trying to discover penicillin but wasn't getting anywhere, I didn't know how to go about it. Anyway, when the war didn't happen, I figured I'd do better with that than in medicine or science; I knew history, I didn't know anything about bread mold or electronics. So I went to Europe after Princip and Lenin and Stalin and the rest, and everything went the way I expected it, but after 1914 . . . after 1914, I didn't know what was happening. Everything was different, my knowledge of history didn't help me anymore."

"I still don't understand. What's special about 1914?"

"That's when the Great War was supposed to start."

Stein sighed. "Mr. Jones, I was just a baby at the time, and you were a grown man, but even *I* know the Great War started in 1921."

Jones nodded. "That's right," he said. "I'd bought seven years. So I wasn't sure, any more, whether the rest were still dangerous. But I knew what they *could* do, if history allowed it, so I tracked down Hitler and the others. And the Second World War never happened."

"Second World War. You say these men you killed would have started it?"

"Some of them, yes."

"And that's the justification for killing them?"

Jones nodded.

"You really did this?" Stein asked, still trying to absorb it. The time travel part was nonsense, but the rest. . . . "You really went all over the world killing people who would have started wars, people I never heard of?"

"Well," Jones explained, "You have to get them early, before they become famous, before they have bodyguards, or followers who will carry on for them."

"But then they haven't done anything yet," Stein objected.

"I'm not in the business of punishment," Jones said. "I'm in the business of prevention."

"You didn't prevent the Great War."

"I tried," Jones said, "But I'm just one man. And I don't know what's going to happen anymore, any more than you do. It's all changed too much."

"*But you killed this kid anyway. With a shotgun.*"

"I'm an old man. My aim isn't what it used to be."

"And you didn't get away this time."

Jones shrugged.

"So was Ted Bundy going to start a Second World War?"

"No," Jones said. "He was just going to kill people."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes," Jones said, "I'm sure."

Stein stood up. "I'll plead insanity," he said. "If you give the jury this story and we play up your age, they may decide you're harmless. But you'll be spending the rest of your life locked up, Mr. Jones; that's the best we can hope for."

"Mr. Stein," Jones said, "It was worth it. Even if I get the chair, it was worth it."

Stein frowned. "If this is all true, if you killed these people, you'll go down as one of the greatest murderers of the twentieth century, Mr. Jones; how can *anything* be worth it?"

Jones burst out laughing and almost fell; the guard at the door turned, ready to intervene, but Stein waved him away.

A moment later Jones was in his chair again. "Mr. Stein," he said, more soberly, "If *I* can go down in history as one of the greatest killers of the twentieth century, with a mere dozen deaths to my name, *that's* why it was worth it!"

Stein stared at him, uncomprehending, as Jones laughed and laughed and laughed. ●

ANNOUNCEMENT

April 1 is the deadline for applications to the 1993 Clarion West Writer's Workshop. The tenth annual workshop will be held from June 20 to July 30, 1993, at Seattle Central Community College, Seattle, Washington. Writers in residence are Pat Murphy, Geoff Ryman, Connie Willis, Lucius Shepard, Alice K. Turner, and Greg Bear. Approximately twenty students will be accepted.

Tuition is $1095. Housing, not including meals, and college credit are available at additional costs. Limited scholarships exist.

Please write or call for application and scholarship information: Clarion West, Suite 350, 15th Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98112; (206) 322-9083.

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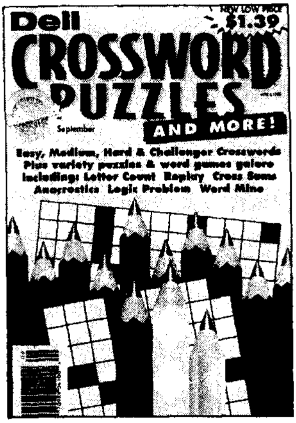
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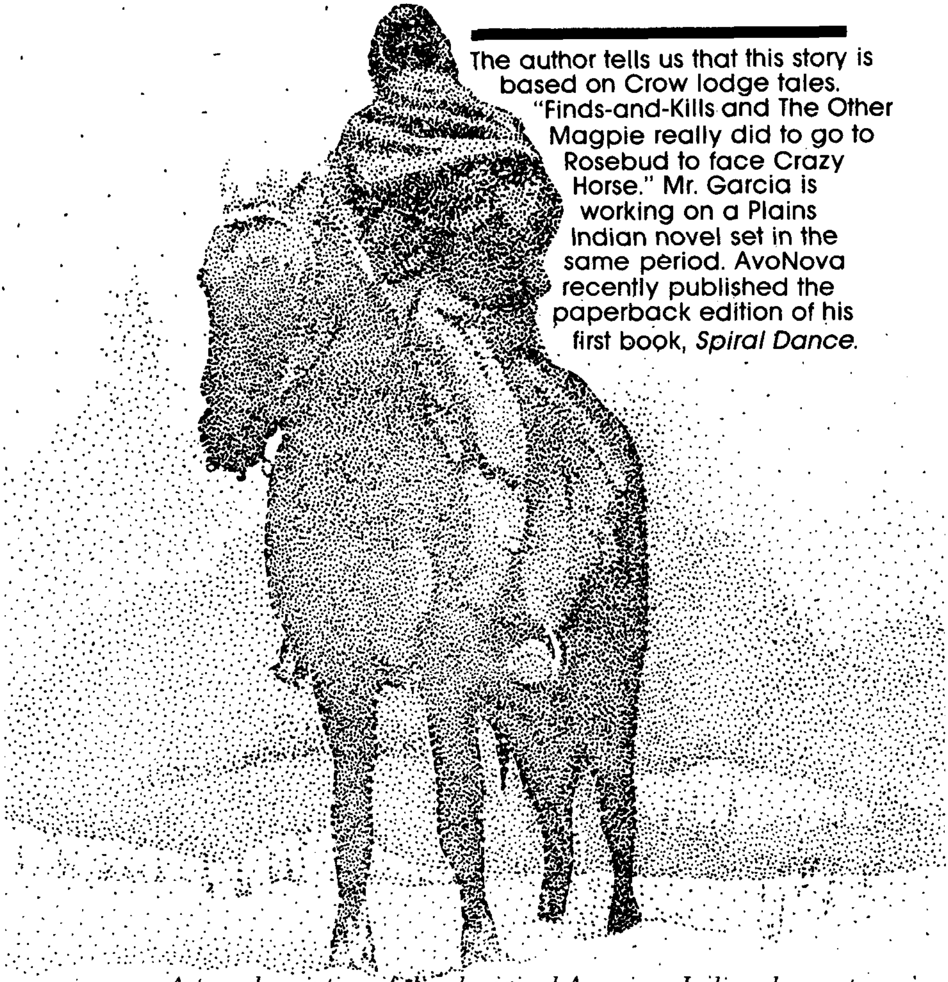
R. Garcia y Robertson

THE OTHER MAGPIE

art: Steve Cavallo

The author tells us that this story is based on Crow lodge tales. "Finds-and-Kills and The Other Magpie really did to go to Rosebud to face Crazy Horse." Mr. Garcia is working on a Plains Indian novel set in the same period. AvoNova recently published the paperback edition of his first book, *Spiral Dance.*



A true description of the aboriginal American Indian dare not be put in print. Novelists of the future will give him a new character; like the Spanish Cid Campeador, the Indian will be knighted and put on horseback after his death. But as the Buddha says, "Amid the brambles a lily may bloom."

—Capt. E.F. Ware, 7th Iowa Cavalry

Medicine Wheel

The Other Magpie knelt on a dusty knoll, sharpening her knife against a flat rock, her heart beating like a rabbit's. Spring starvation stretched her dark skin taut. Ribs and hips poked at her doeskin dress; cheekbones stood out beneath eyes hollow from crying. She mourned her only brother—scalped and killed by the Sioux.

Spread around her were the contents of her weasel-skin Medicine bag: an antelope's tooth, a breath feather, two stone shells from the days when the prairie was a sea, the bright body of a stuffed woodpecker—all the power she had gathered in her fifteen winters. It seemed small and pitiful, pitted against the Faceless Destroyer. Dead eyes on the little woodpecker watched as she sharpened the knife—the slick scrape of iron on stone hid every other sound. Above her rose the black-white tops of the Big Horns; below the knoll stood the tall hourglass tipis of the Kick-Belly Crow.

She stopped. The shining blade was silent. From out of the woods came the drumming of a live woodpecker—the bird's fearless pounding shouted out to her, "Be brave before the world!"

Listening to the living bird, she told herself, "I will cry no more. I will not fear pain, or give in to death." Reaching up, she hacked at her black braids. Feeling the rough fringe of hair brush her shoulders, she promised, "I will mourn my brother as long as my hair is short."

She pressed her left hand hard against the flat rock, splaying her fingers. The butcher knife had been her great grandmother's; decades of women's sharpening had worn the blade down to a steel sliver. Laying the bright edge against the little finger of her left hand, just below the first joint, she struggled to control her fear, trying to feel only grief for her dead brother. Belly muscles tightened as she tasted coldness in the air. There would be more snow before Sundance time.

She pulled the blade back in a single convulsive stroke. Her grandmother's knife sliced skin, then bone, as easily as it carved grizzly meat. Shock shuddered down her spine. Half a finger lay next to the severed braids. She told herself, "As long as I have a left hand, I will remember him—if I grow old and gray, grandchildren will know I lost a brother."

Horrified by what she had done to her guiltless hand, the Other Magpie thought how weak she was—"But with my brother beside me, I was strong. I was everything, brother and sister, man and woman, the two halves to the hoop of life." Now the hoop was cut, like her finger.

Using teeth and her right hand, she tore a thong from her half-sleeve, tying it around her finger to stop the bleeding. Working one-handed was awkward, but that too reminded her of her lost brother. Refilling her Medicine bag, she placed the braids and finger tip in with her antelope tooth, breath feather, stone shells, and dead woodpecker. Lightheaded with grief and loss of blood, she got up to look for Finds-and-Kills, the only person in the Kick-Belly camp likely to help her. Her hurting hand left red stains on everything it touched.

Afternoon shadows stretched out from the tipis. She found Finds-and-Kills at the edge of camp, sitting on a cutbank by Rotten Grass Creek, humming a Medicine song as she mended a moccasin with a long steel needle. Finds-and-Kills had big hands, big feet, and other body peculiarities that separated her from most women. This separateness was why the Other Magpie sought her out; the Magpie needed a woman who had men's Medicine in her, who knew the Sundance and understood death in battle. Finds-and-Kills had the Medicine to open the Way Between the Worlds, the trail that led to the Camp of the Dead.

Sitting down next to her friend, the Magpie trailed her hand in the tumbling water, cleaning and numbing her aching finger. "My brother is dead," she declared, "killed and scalped by Sioux."

"This is so." Finds-and-Kills used a high piping voice. Her coarse features were hardly even feminine, but she had done her damnedest to improve them, tattooing circles on her forehead and a line from lips to chin—painfully determined to look more womanly. "That is why they call them Sioux"—she made the slash across the throat that means "Sioux" in sign talk.

"I must do something for him."

Finds-and-Kills looked up, shocked by the sense of urgency that went beyond mourning. She nodded toward the Other Magpie's cropped hair and cut finger. "You have done what a sister should."

"I must do more." The Magpie meant to have her brother back, even though Death stood between them.

"You cannot be more than a sister," Finds-and-Kills reminded her. The brother-sister taboo was not strong among the Crows, but everyone had a horror of sexes reared in the same tipi becoming too close. "The dead are dead. We tell them, 'Go, do not come back.' " Crows were convinced that death could be catching—no one, not even the Magpie, dared use her brother's name now that he was dead.

"I miss him," the Magpie insisted. "I do not care if he is dead. I must see him again, if only to say goodbye." Coming from a Crow, this was dangerous blasphemy—like a drunk Baptist damning salvation.

"Nah, nah, nah, nah." Now Finds-and-Kills sounded like an old woman. "The Other Magpie cares for nothing but herself and her brother. She is the girl who closed the smoke flaps on the council lodge, who chased a buffalo cow into camp. She is the young woman for whom no man is good enough. The dead go to the Land Beyond. We do not ask them back."

The Other Magpie made the "no" sign. "You have the power to help me. You have the Sundance Medicine. Last spring the men dragged you out to cut the Sundance tree. I have cut off my hair, and cut off my finger—but I cannot cut off my *brother*." She could not stand to think of him lying scalped and naked on the prairie, feeding the coyotes—she could not let their life together end like that.

Finds-and-Kills asked politely if she had gone insane, telling her, "You are far too extravagant, even in grief."

The Magpie smiled, "I am far too extravagant in everything—that is my charm." She had a wild beauty that the big woman both loved and envied, the beauty of a strong brown foal with dainty feet. If it were in

Finds-and-Kills to love another woman, she would have loved the Other Magpie, and the Magpie counted on that attraction. She could be merciless in love. Dozens of men had brought ponies to her tipi, only to be turned away: chief's sons with round arms, seasoned warriors with many wives—all had been sent home with their horses.

Finds-and-Kills sighed, "Your skin smells of pine and sage. If I were a man, I would be outside your tipi, waiting with a blanket whenever you went for wood or water. But one day this wildness will kill you."

"Better to die young and wild, than old and sick in a winter lodge."

No Crow could argue with that. Finds-and-Kills got up and put on her moccasins. "Wait here. I will help you." Watching the big woman walk off toward camp, the Magpie noticed that one moccasin was still unmended—Finds-and-Kills left two different prints in the dust, one torn and the other whole. Sitting, waiting, soaking her finger, the Magpie knew that she was pressing her Medicine. But what else could she do? She would not give in, even to Death, the Faceless Destroyer, the striding terror whose war club is raised over all our heads.

As the sun set behind the Big Horns, Finds-and-Kills came back, carrying what a man would take to search for power: a bone pipe, a plug of short tobacco, and a buffalo robe tanned with the hair on. Wrapped in the robe was her rifle, a Sharps Sporter chambered for half-inch shells—her shooting bag held two-dozen .50-70 centerfire cartridges, stamped out at the Frankfurt Arsenal.

The Magpie cut her brother's trail ponies from the herds, two sorrels and a gray. They had always shared horses, and he had been an only son, indulged in everything. His ponies were all fast and strong, but not fast enough—now his favorite war pony was picketed beside some Sioux lodge. In bright twilight, the two women rode up the Big Horn river, past the ghostly remains of Fort C.F. Smith, burned by the Sioux under Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. Chorus frogs sang by the water, trilling like a thumbnail run over the teeth of a comb. Owls hooted, filling the burnt timbers with the cries of lost souls. Mournful hoots meant that the Magpie was on the path to the Beyond, the way she wanted to go.

Dawn found them deep in the canyon of the Big Horn. Here, half-mile cliffs towered over the river like giant painted lodges, striped with sandstone. For a time, four ravens flew behind them. The Magpie could tell by their calls that the birds hoped that the women were buffalo hunters. The land tilted up under their ponies' hooves. By the time they reached the timbered slopes of Medicine Mountain, atop Porcupine Creek, even the ravens had turned back. Blue peaks rose one above the other, like the backs of giant buffalo. Now the Magpie could hear the Beyond calling in the cries of eagles and in the wind whistling off black pine tops, between the mountains and the sky.

Near the treeline, they hobbled their ponies, walking the rest of the way. On the rocky shoulder of Medicine Mountain, the Magpie saw the gateway to the Spirit World. The spokes of a great stone Medicine Wheel poked up through the windblown snow—twenty-eight spokes; the number of nights in a moon, the number of days in a woman's cycle, the number of poles in a Sundance Lodge. A stone hub stood in the center. Six cairns marked the midsummer sunrise and sunset, and the risings of Sirius, Rigel, and Aldebaran.

Finds-and-Kills gave her the pipe and tobacco, telling her in a low deep voice, "This is as far as I will go. Stay here. Seek a vision, mourn your brother, but remember that you are letting go. Do not say his name. Do not call him back." The Magpie did not answer, already observing a holy silence. She wrapped her buffalo robe about her, hair side in, planting herself beside the Medicine Wheel, feeling the sacredness of the place. Her brother would come for her here, if she waited long enough. Finds-and-Kills lit a fire and then left.

Darkness crept out of the earth, swallowing the light. Watching the first and brightest stars come out, the Magpie felt her frailty. She smoked to greet the stars, lighting Finds-and-Kills' pipe, holding it aloft, letting the winds fan the flames, sharing her smoke with the sky. Between puffs, she stared at the Medicine Wheel, waiting for a vision. Her fire was fixed up Crow fashion, logs laid with only their ends touching; every so often she pushed a little more of one log into the fire—making the wood burn longer, giving her something to do.

Stars wheeled overhead. Sirius and the Seven Sisters set. The Hanging Road shone like a band of frost in the sky. She could see how the world moved in circles, with the great stone wheel matching the spinning heavens overhead. Her mind rolled with the night, but her brother did not come. Finally, a great square of four stars rose in the east; behind it came the light, blotting out the night.

At noon, the sun beat down on the snow. Finds-and-Kills came with fresh wood for the fire, and gave the Other Magpie a sip from her water bag. The Magpie was thankful, but said nothing that might break the Medicine. The next nights were worse. Her fire went out. No stars kept her company—the Magpie was blinded from staring all day at the gleaming white blanket covering the Medicine Wheel. Numb to the cold, she could only hear the nightbirds and smell the mountain scent of pine pitch and bear grass. Her stomach felt small and empty. Her body was lighter than a breath feather, but the barrier between here and the Beyond is not easily broken.

Strength ebbed. In the cavernous darkness, she lost track of days and nights, no longer knowing how long she had gone without sleeping and eating. Dreams invaded her blindness, bright flashes and moving shadows. Defeat closed in. "I have lost," she thought bitterly, but she did not have the strength to leave. Death had claimed her brother—now she felt the Faceless Destroyer coming for her. Tears fell from snowblind eyes. Unwilling to die alone, the Other Magpie whispered her brother's name, the name which no one had dared speak since the day he died—calling on him to come for her.

A spirit wind swept over the Medicine Wheel, opening her sightless eyes. She saw neither night nor day, but a strange in-between where the snow was black and the sky was white. Raven's-wing clouds hung overhead, and the Medicine Wheel was a great gray web, stretched over black snow. Out of the center of that web staggered a wraith in worn moccasins and ragged leggings. Death came for her wearing her brother's stricken face—ash-white skin stopped above his eyebrows, black naked bone shown through the circle made by a Sioux scalping knife.

"*Sister*," he moaned, opening his hands, showing the ragged wound in his chalk white chest. *"Why have you called me?"*

She reached out. Their hands met but did not touch. "I could not say goodbye without seeing you again."

"You called me back. I am lost. I cannot enter the Camp of the Dead. Do you like what you see?"

The Magpie hated what she saw. She wanted to look away, ashamed to have called him back, but you cannot shut your eyes to a vision. "I did not do this to you."

"You called me back. Now I wander, without a robe against the cold, without hair to cover my head." Her brother's voice rose, filling her with the shrill force of his suffering. *"I cannot enter the Beyond without some token of honor."*

"What do you need?" She was ready to give anything—her hair and fingertip seemed trivial compared to his loss. "What token of honor?"

"I must have a Sioux scalp."

The Magpie wanted to tell him how impossible that was, but her tongue was twisted from thirst. She was trapped by her own Medicine—having called him back, how could she dare deny him?

He started to shrink and recede, saying, *"Help me, sister. Help me go whole into the Beyond."* She tried to rise, to go to him. Tottering, she stumbled and fell.

At noon on the fourth day, Finds-and-Kills found her stretched out beside the high Medicine Wheel.

Men won't tell about the woman who rode with Three Stars to the Rosebud battle, because she was a wild one, with no man; bad and brave. People called her the Other Magpie.

—Pretty Shield, Crow Medicine Woman

The Rosebud

By starving her body and staying awake, the Magpie had pushed her spirit into the Shadow World. She recovered slowly, lying in a wickiup

Finds-and-Kills had made out of bent boughs. The wickiup fire made her limbs burn. The least light sent sparks flying into her eyes. She heard Finds-and-Kills shuffle about in the blackness like a mother bear, and felt her friend's thick fingers flick snow into her eyes, moistening and soothing.

When the Magpie had eaten and slept, and her eyes could stand the burning daylight, the two women rode back down the Big Horn. Chickadees called out to them, saying, "Summer's near."

At the Kick-Belly camp, the Magpie's parents saw her shorn hair and missing finger joint, and assumed that she had been in the hills mourning her brother. As their daughter grew older and wilder, they'd learned to put the best interpretation on her wanderings—what could be worse than having a grown daughter hanging around the tipi, refusing to marry and behaving like a boy? Asking no questions, her father collected his son's ponies and gave them away, to show the family's grief and to give his ghost no reason to return.

It was already too late. The Magpie had ridden his horses to the Medicine Wheel, and called his name. Her family's cut-down tipi, short hair, and deliberate poverty were constant reminders of her brother's wretched condition. Unless she avenged him, he would never be the strong handsome man she remembered from life.

But freeing him was a crushing obligation. How was she to get her hands on a Sioux scalp? Wife Stealing Time was over, and the first war parties had gone out. The Yellow-eye soldier chief, No-Hip-Bone, had come upriver in a Fire Boat, asking for Crow wolves to help the Long Knives find the Sioux—two boys barely older then her, named Curly and Grandmother's Knife, had gone with No-Hip-Bone, to meet Son of the Morning Star on the Yellowstone. They had no brothers to avenge, but they went because they were boys. The Magpie complained at the unfairness of this.

Finds-and-Kills had no sympathy, "You have done too much already. Stay in camp. Mourn your brother. You have no gun, and no horse. You are no Woman Chief, to slip into Sioux Country with a skinning knife and come back with a scalp."

To prove her point, Curly and Grandmother's Knife came trudging back into camp a few days later, saying that the Crow who went with No-Hip-Bone had lost all their horses—"Sioux swam the Yellowstone and came right into camp. The Long Knives could not tell Sioux from Crow, and let them have our ponies." The horseless Crows had been cold and miserable, with no women to cook or pitch tipis, lining up every morning to be counted by the Long Knives. The Magpie could see that there was no profit in joining No-Hip-Bone's Long Knives—but at night she still heard her brother's cries in the hoots of owls and in the wind howling between the tipi ears.

In the Moon When Leaves are Full, at Sundance time, a strange Snake nce into camp. She knew at once that he was a Snake, because Snake men are short and shabby but make a tremendous show. Soon the Magpie heard a Caller going around. Rattler, the Great Snake himself, had invited the Kick-Bellies to join a war party against the Sioux. Rattler's invitation was bound to be accepted. Unlike the Long Knives, Rattler did not dither about, or do things backward. If Rattler said that he would fight the Sioux, he would fight the Sioux. He would not waste mornings lining up and counting his warriors. And if Rattler's Snakes went alone against the Sioux, the Crows would never be able to forget it. Snakes would see to that.

Late that night, the Other Magpie sat in the family lodge, listening to her parents sleep, and watching sparks fly up from the fire, following the spiraling lodge poles into the Beyond. The moon was nearly full—perfect for pulling smoke poles out of tipi ears—but she was not that sort of wild girl anymore.

Her wildness must now have a *purpose*, even if it meant joining Rattler's war party with just a skinning knife. Lifting the lodge cover, she slipped out to where Finds-and-Kills picketed her ponies. Taking two trail ponies, a black mare and a paint, she left a bloody braid tied to a picket pin, so her friend would know who had the horses.

Men had gathered near the ruins of Fort Smith, stripped for war. Their muscles stood out in the half light like the humps on a buffalo herd. The Snake was not with them, but a half-breed named Grabber told them that Long Knives were waiting for Rattler south of the Tongue. The Magpie went with them, crossing the headwaters of the Little Big Horn by moonlight.

Day dawned hot and dry. Men looked her over. She hoped that her shorn hair and cut finger spoke for her—telling them that she was not just tired of being a virgin, looking for education and excitement. By dawnlight, she saw how few they were.

There were famous warriors among them, like Flathead Woman and Alligator-Stands-Up. Plenty Coups had brought his Burnt Mouth Crazy Dogs, and Bull Snake was leading some Lumpwoods Without Sweethearts; but she saw only three chiefs—Old Crow, Medicine Crow, and Good Heart. Up ahead, the Sioux would be gathering in their thousands—Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Crow King, Red Top, Lame Deer, Big Road, and Runs-the-Enemy would be waiting with their bands, along with hundreds of Cheyenne.

Bull Snake dropped back to ride beside her—his broad forehead painted white with clay. He was as near perfect as a man could be, tough as teak, not too short, not too tall, with a straight nose and smooth face. His hands and feet were small as a woman's, smaller than Finds-and-Kills'. He was everything a woman could want—with four wives to prove it; his gaze charmed females as easily as a snake charms a chickadee.

He gave her a cool glance. "We need no nervous virgins. This is Sundance time. The grass is thick in the bottoms, and the Sioux come together like buffalo in rut." He was half boasting, half hoping to scare her.

She made the sign that means, "I know that."

"Go back," Bull Snake advised. "When your brother was alive, no man's horses were good enough to win you. He turned aside every offer. But now he is dead, and you know nothing about battle or scalp taking."

"I can learn," she retorted, twisting her drag rope around her hands, refusing to be turned aside.

Bull Snake snorted and kicked his pony, going back to be with his Lumpwoods. It was unseemly for a handsome war chief to argue with a silly virgin.

Crossing over a series of ridges, they descended the bluffs and forded the Tongue. There were no Long Knives on the south bank. Men spread out to look for sign. Near the mouth of Prairie Dog Creek, they found iron-shod prints and mounds of firewood—showing that the Yellow-eyes had camped there—and also several arrows fletched with turkey feathers. Long wavy lines snaked down their shafts, and they were not poorly notched like Sioux arrows—the men all agreed that they were Cheyenne. Hostile Cheyenne had met the Long Knives on the Tongue, warning them away, or challenging them to come over—either way, the Long Knives had turned and headed back in the direction of their forts along the Platte Road.

For most of the men, this meant that the war party was over. Old Crow said he would go south with Grabber and look for the Long Knives. Men agreed that this was fine for Old Crow, who did not have many moons left and was clearly senile to trust a guide like Grabber—a half-breed who promised much and delivered nothing.

The Other Magpie sat on her borrowed horse, watching the war party melt in the morning sun. She was torn between duty to her brother and fear of being left alone in incredibly dangerous country.

Bull Snake declared that Crazy Dogs and scared virgins could run away—"I will do some hunting." He made a nonchalant show of crossing the Tongue to look for breakfast.

That decided her. Death could not be worse than coming home shamefaced and hearing the Lumpwoods sing about her. She dismounted and watered her ponies, rubbing them down with bunches of bluestem.

The war party dwindled to a dozen nervous young Lumpwoods Without Sweethearts, sitting in a circle, playing cards and laying bets on who would return first: Bull Snake, Old Crow and Grabber, or the Cheyenne and Sioux. None supposed they would see any Long Knives.

They kept looking at her and laughing, then one got up and walked over. He wore pink body paint with silver zig-zags, and she could smell the sweat on his limbs.

Loosening the blanket about his waist, he dropped it at her feet, nodding toward the low willows by the river—"Virgin, come into the bushes. You can keep the blanket when we are done." He told her that he had the virility of a rutting bull, and that any girl could count herself lucky to begin with him.

She replied politely that she would not even defecate under the same bush with him. Raising her voice so that the others could hear, she held up her shorn finger, "I do not want your blankets, or what is beneath your breechcloths—I want one of you ready-to-die Lumpwoods to avenge my brother! The man who gets me a Sioux scalp may bring ponies to my parents' lodge." She doubted that a dozen Lumpwoods could come up with even a lock of Sioux hair, but it was worth a try.

The Lumpwoods laughed, making the pinwheel motion beside their heads, to show that she was crazy—the Other Magpie was a well-known man hater. The smiling brave picked up his blanket and went back to the card game.

From the bluff above came a Coyote call that meant that a rider was approaching. Lumpwoods scrambled up to see who had won—but the arriving rider was not Cheyenne or Sioux, and not Bull Snake or Old Crow. It was Finds-and-Kills, riding down from the north with her Sharps Sporter across her lap.

She dismounted, thanking the Magpie for taking care of her horses, then saying, "It was silly of you to slip off on the vague hope of meeting the Long Knives." She reminded the Magpie how poorly things had gone for the Crows who went with No-Hip-Bone.

"This war party is with Rattler's Snakes," the Magpie insisted. "It will be different."

"Different does not always mean better—with Snakes, it may mean a whole lot worse. Besides, I see no war party"—Finds-and-Kills nodded toward the card players—"just a handful of Lumpwoods Without Sweethearts playing Red Dog for pony stakes."

Before the Magpie could reply, the Coyote call sounded again. Bull Snake came splashing back across the river, a dead buck slung over his horse's withers. Without a word he dropped the deer between the arguing women, then dismounted to smoke with the Lumpwoods. The effect on Finds-and-Kills was magical. She stopped haranguing the Other Magpie, drew her hatchet, and began to cut kindling for a cookfire.

The Magpie was disgusted. She told Finds-and-Kills that she would rather be yelled at than see a friend so eager to be used. "He treats us like we are his, here to clean his kill and fix his breakfast."

Finds-and-Kills was unashamed. "Of course, what woman can resist him?" The big woman took a percussion cap from her shooting bag, twisting it in a rag with some black powder. She laid the rag atop the kindling, hitting it with a hatchet until the cap burst and the rag caught fire. "They say he has an elk-bone whistle, and when he blows it, you just have to go with him into the brush—to find out why he is called Bull Snake."

"I have heard his whistle, and I would not go with him if his name was Pole-in-the-Crotch." The missing part of her finger hurt, and she could not scratch it.

"Nah, nah, nah—No man is good enough for you."

"Not true. Remember Kills Good, the wife of Chief Long Horse—the woman who had such long lovely hair?"

"Who could forget her hair." Finds-and-Kills sounded wistful.

"Every morning, Long Horse brushed and braided her hair, so that the whole camp would know how much he loved her. *That* is the kind of man I want. Not the kind that takes me in the bushes, so that he may sing my name to the Lumpwoods."

"I wish Bull Snake would just hum *my* name." Finds-and-Kills looked up at her. "You can be free and virtuous, with your straight face and small feet. Is it a wonder people talk? You menstruate, but you are not married."

"You talk like my mother." The Magpie knelt down to help gut the buck. "Besides, it will be a long time before I am married. I told the Lumpwoods I would only go with a warrior who avenged my brother—if I even look at another man, think what they will sing about me."

A pair of Coyote calls came from the bluff. Two Yellow-eyes came splashing across the Tongue and into camp. The lead rider whistled through a gap in his teeth, letting the Crows know he was coming. He was a bear of a man with long filthy hair, wearing a battered felt hat, woolen leggings, and a raffish scalp shirt shining with grease. Worn moccasins were thrust through huge wooden Mexican stirrups. Across his saddle-horn lay a Springfield .45-75 "Long Tom" infantry rifle—a bone-handled Bowie knife and two dead rabbits dangled from his belt. Beneath the wild hair and whiskers, the Magpie recognized the squawman Crows called "Plenty Good."

Behind Plenty Good came a completely different sort of Yellow-eye: a young Long Knife dressed in blue, clean-faced as a Crow, wearing a neatly creased white hat. Not too tall, not too short, he did not have the blue watery eyes that made many Yellow-eyes look like spirit persons. Long stripes ran down his pant seams. Army rank was a mystery to the Magpie, but leg stripes meant a Long Knife chief, a "Captain," to use a word the Crows borrowed from Spanish.

Plenty Good's rabbits landed right beside Bull Snake's dead buck. The trapper swung out of the saddle, pulled a pipe from his hatband, and asked the Lumpwoods if they wanted to smoke—every movement was lethargic, meant to put the Crows at ease. The Long Knife with him moved quicker, brimming with barely contained energy, dark eyes flicking back and forth as he dismounted. Even squatting on his heels, he seemed half in action, holding in his Medicine. The Magpie guessed that this handsome Yellow-eye could not speak Crow. Every so often, the trapper had to turn to him to translate. By listening closely, she caught some of what the Captain said. He called Plenty Good "*Très Bon,*" or sometimes "T-Bone."

Suddenly the Long Knife leaped up, hitting his gloved hands together, saying, "Jesus!" She knew that he was praying. Jesus was a Yellow-eye name for the Great Mystery.

He started kicking the dirt, like a Mandan doing the Buffalo Dance, saying, "My God, *Très Bon*, all Grabber got was a dozen warriors, an old man, and two women?" God was another name for the Great Mystery—but the rest was meaningless to the Magpie. Still, she was pleased to find him so pious. She liked his voice, and the funny-serious face he made when he prayed. There was something far-off yet appealing about him.

Plenty Good cocked his head to indicate the Lumpwoods. "Those bucks claim *beaucoup* Crow were here not long ago."

"But what in Heaven are we going to do *now?*" He swung his arm, taking in the camp, the stream, and half the Big Horns in a single sweep. Heaven was a name for the Beyond.

"Nothin' much," Plenty Good shrugged, "not 'til the breed gets back with the ole chief." He gestured toward Finds-and-Kills, bent over the buck, tearing back the skin, scooping out steaming entrails. "I'm gonna get myself some rabbit 'n' venison, an' maybe some Crow for dessert."

The officer glanced at Finds-and-Kills, then at Plenty Good, giving both of them a queer look that the Other Magpie could not interpret. She got up to find more firewood, watching as she worked.

Plenty Good took her place, tossing his saddle down to use as a backrest, giving Finds-and-Kills a gap-toothed grin. "Howdy, pretty," he addressed her in pidgin Crow. The big woman laughed at Plenty Good's insolence, but the Magpie could see that her friend was pleased to be getting male attention, even from a Yellow-eye.

The Magpie had gotten about a dozen sticks when the Long Knife Captain bounded up without warning. She stood stock still, unable to guess what he would do next. The man smiled, bent down, and began *to gather wood!* She could barely believe it, but there he was, working like a woodchuck, grinning all the time, gathering up one load, dumping it by the fire, then starting on another. Crows say, "Yellow-eyes keep warm by gathering firewood"—and soon the Captain had stacked enough wood for a week. She could hear the Lumpwoods laughing. To hide her confusion, the Magpie sat down, drawing her knife to skin and gut the rabbits.

"What's so funny, T-Bone?" asked the Captain, standing beside Plenty Good, breathing hard, looking about for something else to do.

"Yew'r the show," drawled the squawman. "No Crow gathers wood for a woman unless he's got the itch to lift her skirt."

The Captain looked flustered. "I only wanted to help." Plenty Good gave him a leathery grin, "Hell, help yerself. *This* hoss has got his own hindsights set on the big 'un."

"Surely one is too young and the other married." The Magpie heard irritation in her Captain's voice. She wished she could thank him for his flattering attention, but explain that she could hardly copulate until her brother had been avenged.

Plenty Good shook his head. "Ain't any such thing as too young among the Crow. If a girl is ready, she is ready. An' I saw no husband sign. This hoss guesses these women are here to avenge a killing—an' maybe see a little man action on the side."

The Captain stood with his mouth hanging open. "Well, I mean, I merely . . ."

Plenty Good laughed, "Sir, say what yew please. It's a free country an' these coons don't hear American." He gave Finds-and-Kills a friendly grin, saying in English, "As good as deaf, ain't yew, sister?"

Finds-and-Kills blushed, bending down, hiding her face in her work. The Captain shrugged, "I thought it terrible to see a girl working while men loafed—I certainly had no designs on her."

"That's good." Plenty Good studied the Magpie, "cause *this girl* is one of yer high-toned, high-strung, Crow virgins. Pretty to look at, but wild as a peck o' panthers. See her shorn hair and short finger? Probably lost a father, or a brother, and she is out to get some of her own back from the Sioux." Magpie recognized the word Sioux, and guessed that Plenty Good was talking about her.

"No, the older doe's fur *this* coon," Plenty Good concluded. "She's a big'un, but I wager I can wrassle with her. Two falls in three anyway. That young 'un's pretty, but lookit her handle her knife. If yew don't come onto her just right, she'll feed you yer pecker on a plate."

"I'll remember that," replied the Captain dryly, seeing the Magpie strip the bloody skin off the second rabbit, then drape their pink bodies over the flames. She was secretly happy to have him watching. Despite being a Yellow-eye, he had shown his desire to copulate in a refined but energetic way—not like the insolent Lumpwood who had thrown his blanket at her feet.

While the men breakfasted on venison, the women shared Plenty Good's rabbits. Finds-and-Kills leaned over, whispering to the Magpie. "The big hairy one likes me." The Magpie agreed that Plenty Good had done everything short of dragging Finds-and-Kills into the brush.

Her friend hastened to add, "The one who wants to copulate with you is handsome."

"Yes," the Magpie eyed her Captain carefully, "he moves like a man with much Medicine." Her own Medicine felt shaky. The handsome Long Knife had shown his interest at the worst possible time. She was duty bound to avenge her brother, and likely to be dead and scalped when the Sioux were done with her—in poor condition to attract a man.

"But he cannot speak." Finds-and-Kills spit out a pair of small rabbit bones. "I could not love a man I could not talk with afterward."

"True," admitted the Magpie. "He does not talk, but he has a strong friendly voice, and he carried wood for me." No man needed words to show his desire.

Plenty Good entertained the women by telling them how the Long Knives had gotten lost, mistaking Prairie Dog Creek for Little Goose Creek. "They stumbled onto the Tongue, bumped into some Cheyenne, rebounded, an' came to rest by the Forks of the Goose, where they had meant to be in the first place."

The Magpie could not understand how hundreds of men and horses could lose themselves, mistaking one stream for another.

"Weren't hard," replied Plenty Good, half in Crow, half in English. "Army's a lot of ex-clerks and unemployed gandy dancers, led by coons that wouldn't know a goose from a prairie dog if it flew overhead an' shat on em." His explanation made no sense to the Magpie.

He treated them to cups of Black Medicine and handfuls of white sap. Yellow-eyes food is not like real food—the Black Medicine was bitter and bracing, and the white sap looked like sand but tasted sweeter than honey. Plenty Good shrugged off their thanks, saying something nonsensical about "catching more flies with sugar." Licking sweet grains off her fingers, the Magpie wondered why the Yellow-eyes caught flies—perhaps they ate them, too.

When the sun had moved the width of a small pine, Grabber and Old Crow returned, saying that the Long Knives were indeed camped at the Forks of the Goose. Everyone mounted up to gallop after the retreating war party. Collecting stragglers as they went, they caught the main body loafing through the fat country above the Greasy Grass, and got them turned around. The Other Magpie rode back beside her Captain, who looked splendid on his big American horse. He smiled at her, gesturing at the landscape and making meaningless comments. Around them rode a barbaric retinue of tall Crow braves on painted ponies, carrying guns, bull-hide shields, and sharp-bladed war clubs—the Magpie understood now why men so loved the warpath.

At the Forks of the Goose, they found the Long Knives lined up to greet them, neat and straight on their huge mounts, sitting stirrup to stirrup for nearly a mile. Behind them was their huge square cantonment. A Crow went to war with weapons, blanket, breechcloth, and a pair of ponies, but Yellow-eyes would not even take a piss that poorly equipped. Their camp was stocked with wagons, tents, bedrolls, cots, kegs, barrels, cookstoves, packs, mules, horses, cattle, pigs, and pets—it was as big as the Main Band's camp at the Crow Agency, and overflowed with Yellow-eyes—sleeping, cleaning, cooking, running foot-races, cursing and hectoring each other with no sense of privacy or restraint. Everything was done by men, which worried the Magpie as much as the Sioux ever had.

Plenty Good and the Captain took them to see the only woman in the cantonment. She sat under guard, wearing a man's shirt and a makeshift skirt fashioned from a striped Mackinaw blanket. Plenty Good introduced her as Calamity Jane. She was plainly bored with being a prisoner, saying "How" and smiling at the Captain. The Magpie was not jealous—a man like her Captain must have many sweethearts; besides, she could see that the Calamity's attention embarrassed him tremendously. He tipped his hat to hide his blushing face.

The Magpie asked why Jane was not allowed to cook or gather wood. Plenty Good grinned, "Calamity was caught posing as a teamster. She did a man's work, but acted over-friendly to the mules—didn't cuss 'em enough. Now she's suspected of being over-friendly with the men, too." When Finds-and-Kills understood that Calamity's crimes were wearing pants, helping with the packing, and wanting to copulate, she was horrified—and insisted on leaving. The Magpie tried to comfort her, pointing out, "They are Yellow-eyes. We are Crow." Finds-and-Kills did not feel safe until they were back in the Crow camp, working on a wickiup.

The Magpie kept looking back toward the cantonment, hoping to see her Captain. Bugles blew. The Long Knives lined up to count themselves. Then Rattler arrived. His Snakes galloped up to the line of Long Knives, waving glittering lances, neatly turning left-front into line. Rattler employed Texans, former Confederate officers, to teach his warriors how to parade, but he had brought even fewer braves than the Crows.

She did not see her Captain again until evening council. There she spotted him sitting among the Long Knife chiefs by a huge bonfire of crackling boughs. She realized that his restless Medicine was natural—all the Long Knife chiefs were staring about, wide-eyed and inquisitive, unable to sit still like warriors. The only movement among the Crows was the slow circulation of pipes. Even the Snakes managed to look dignified and attentive.

Half-breeds and squawmen had to repeat each word in three languages, so that the Magpie had plenty of time to dwell on what was happening. She saw death all around her, in the ghostly white of the wagon covers, in the intense blackness of the night. Crows and Snakes were horribly few, less than three hundred, and the night hid thousands of Sioux warriors. Out beyond the firelight was Sitting Bull with his deadly visions, and Crazy Horse with his never-miss Medicine gun. She imagined the avalanche of arrows, and the hideous cry, "Hwoon, hwoon," as Sioux war clubs thudded into flesh. The thousand-odd Long Knives in the cantonment were scant comfort, considering how easily they got lost or confused. Determined to meet her fears head on, she got up, walking away from the circle of men, straight into the darkness. Either powerful Medicine protected her, or she was going to die; there was no middle way. No one seemed to notice her going.

The night was covered by clouds. The only light came from the huge campfires lit by the Yellow-eyes—the dark plain burned in a hundred places, as if all the stars in the sky had fallen between the Forks of the Goose. Turning her back to the fires, she called out into inky void, saying to her brother, "Come, guide me, protect me, or I can never do as you ask."

Buffalo grass brushed her ankles, nodding in the night wind. She heard the hoarse chirp of a Mormon cricket, followed by the yips and laughter of Old Man Coyote. Then from far off came a low eerie call.

Whooo! Whooo!

She pictured the huge shadowy bird of death, with his speckled body, powerful wings, and heart-shaped face, his round eyes looking almost human. From out of that ghostly face, the call grew louder, coming closer.

Whooo! Whooo!

The last mournful note broke into harsh screeching directly overhead. Darkness parted behind the bird of death, and her brother strode toward her. He lacked color and substance, but stood upright, with a proud look on his hideously mutilated head. In his hand, he held a long coup stick, wrapped in buffalo hide and trimmed with hair. A single breath feather fluttered at the base of the shaft.

His mouth split in a skeletal grin. *"Sister, take this coup stick against the Sioux. Take it and count coup for me."*

Shaking, she reached into the Beyond, taking the coup stick. Wind howled. Rain started to fall. Her brother shrank back, vanishing into the night. She found herself holding an ordinary length of cherrywood—cold, hard, familiar; it had no hide, hair, or feather.

Drumming rose up from the Crow camp. Men's hands beat on taut parfleche, pushing back the night. She followed the drumming back to camp. The council was over. Flickering light came from the cracks in the wickiups. Yellow-eyes wandered about looking amazed, including Plenty Good and her Captain. Plenty Good nudged the officer, "Take a peek into one of those lodges. It's a peephole into Hell."

The Magpie watched her Captain lean over, looking through a crack in the covering of a men's wickiup. She pictured the men huddled inside, half-naked, crouched around a small fire, moaning and chanting, making Medicine for the coming fight. He straightened up, shaking his head. "I thought they would be resting after riding all night and half a day."

"Resting?" Plenty Good chuckled. "They figure they'll sleep enough when they're dead."

Unable to understand what they were saying, the Magpie sat down before her own wickiup and began to wrap the cherrywood staff in buffalo hide. Rain pattered down. Winding the hide as tight as she could, she trimmed the staff with tufts of hair, fixing her breath feather to the bottom, making it match the stick in her vision. As she worked, she stole glances at the Captain's boots, shining in the firelight.

Plenty Good stood over her, saying, "Bet she lost a brother. Now she's making herself a coup stick."

"She'll be going into battle with only that?" The Magpie heard incredulity in her Captain's voice.

"Damn straight," declared the squawman, "and you are gonna need to be one eager beaver to stay ahead of her."

The officer shook his head, saying she looked young and helpless.

"Sure she is. But that's how the Crows make war—the cussedest mix of cruelty, calculated idiocy, and raw courage you are ever likely to see."

At dawn, the Long Knives put on a ridiculous display, mounting two hundred soldiers on pack mules—they had not brought enough horses. Neither mules nor riders liked the idea. All morning, the Magpie saw mules bucking off riders and breaking saddles, or charging about with cursing Long Knives clinging to their backs. Yellow-eyes never lost their ability to amaze. The mule rodeo made them a day late leaving the camps at the Forks of the Goose. Without her handsome Captain beside her, there was nothing romantic about the ride. Rattlers snaked through the buffalo grass, emerging from their winter holes to rejoin society.

Shots made her sit up, staring wildly about, but it was only some Lumpwoods shooting buffalo for the thrill of seeing them fall over. The men's antics angered her. So did her own fear—here she was, trying to part a warrior from his hair, but frightened by men shooting buffalo. She told herself bitterly, "Silly fool, you better get used to guns going off." Riding a strange pony, surrounded by armed and nervous men, the Magpie realized that she might never live to see the Sioux. Already, a Long Knife had managed to shoot himself dead while chopping wood.

At sundown, they pitched camp near the headwaters of the Rosebud. Horses, happy to be free of their saddles, rolled down grassy slopes strewn with blue flox and prairie clover. Bull Snake strode over to their fire, bringing some tripe and tongue. Finds-and-Kills made the meat into sausage, threading it on a ramrod and rolling it on the coals until it was cooked.

Neither woman got to taste it. Bull Snake took the sausage back to his fire, where Lumpwoods, Fox Warriors, and Crazy Dogs were "Naming Married Women." This naming was something the Other Magpie had heard of but never seen, because it only happened on the war path in enemy country. Men passed the buffalo sausage like a pipe, each man biting off a bit, saying what he would do in battle and then naming a married woman he had copulated with. Bull Snake started off, "I will take a pony for my sweetheart Pretty Bottom." The Crazy Dogs laughed, and each named several women. Crazy Dogs are so wild and reckless most husbands let them have their way.

The Other Magpie studied the husbands' faces. Each tried to show no emotion, but she could tell by their eyes which were expecting their wives' names, and which did not see it coming. The sausage came to Pretty Bottom's husband. He bit off a big piece, saying he would count coup, calmly naming Bull Snake's youngest wife. Foxes snickered. Crazy Dogs howled. A man who swore by buffalo meat staked his life on his words—Pretty Bottom's husband was either telling the truth, or risking death just to take Bull Snake down a notch.

Having no one to name, she wrapped herself in a buffalo robe and lay staring at the starless sky. As she fell asleep, it began to rain again.

At half-light, she was awakened by a hand on her shoulder. Rain had stopped. Finds-and-Kills' huge silhouette knelt over her. "Our wolves found a Sioux campfire in the hills." Men at the next fire were admiring a blanket brought back by the scouts, made of rubber, useful for keeping the rain off. Who knew the Sioux had such luxuries?

"I am afraid," whispered Finds-and-Kills.

"So am I," the Magpie admitted—she only hoped that her coming death would be creditable enough to set her brother free.

"I am worried by more than death." Finds-and-Kills' voice was low and hoarse.

The Magpie told her that death was enough of a worry.

"I am afraid of disgrace as well."

She found this hard to imagine; Finds-and-Kills was as straight and stalwart as anyone she knew.

"I am afraid of what will happen if the Sioux kill me, and then strip my body. I know how they will laugh when they see me naked."

The Magpie was not looking forward to that either. She did not expect to cut much of a figure sprawled naked and bloody on the prairie. Her friend produced a bundle of men's clothes wrapped in a blanket, saying, "Help me change. Hold up this blanket so the men will not see."

The Magpie got up and covered the big woman as best she could. By dawnlight, she could see what Finds-and-Kills was hiding. Her friend's body was not like other women's bodies—no breasts, just a broad chest, and men's private parts hanging down between hairy thighs. Finds-and-kills was not a woman by birth, but by choice. When she stepped out from behind the blanket, she did not look like a woman at all, except for her tattoos. The blanket shirt, leggings, and breechcloth fit naturally—and must have belonged to Finds-and-Kills before she became a woman.

"If I am killed in my dress, the Sioux will laugh, saying, 'This Crow was hiding in a dress.' Now they will merely think I am a man."

The Magpie stood glumly holding the blanket. "If I am killed, there will be no surprises, nothing for the Sioux to even smile at."

"Yes," her friend agreed, "you are lucky."

The Magpie did not feel lucky. Preparing her Medicine as best she could, she painted her forehead yellow and took the stuffed woodpecker from her Medicine bag to tie in her hair. Everyone mounted up. Setting off over sodden ground, following the south fork of the Rosebud, the war party was amused by the "new man" among them. The Magpie did not find her friend's transformation funny. The new man next to her seemed half a stranger—and her Captain rode with the Long Knives. She felt abandoned, going into battle very alone.

The south fork of the Rosebud corkscrewed through thickets of wild roses and sweet briar. At the big double bend where the forks came together, the ground rose up—benches by the river blended into low bluffs topped by conical hills, forming a natural amphitheater, alive with menace. Her brother whispered to her on the wind, *"This is the place."*

Yellow-eyes straggled along the bottom in a line stretched all the way back to last night's camp. Their leaders called a halt for the rear to catch up, before plunging into the wooded defile where the bluffs came within a long bowshot of the river. The Magpie saw Medicine Crow in his buffalo headdress making signs, saying that the Long Knives should stay mounted while scouts swept the hills for Sioux. The Yellow-eyes ignored him, dismounting to smoke, talk, and play cards, moving like men in a dream.

Finds-and-Kills looked grim in a man's clothes and a man's paint, saying, "Sitting Bull has made Medicine over the Long Knives. They cannot see the bluffs. They see only what the Sioux want them to see."

Morning turned to noontime. Hot air shimmered like water. The Magpie scanned the hills, too scared to speak or spit. She had not seen a single Sioux, or heard a shot in anger, but the way the land rolled up toward the bluffs was enough to set her heart racing. Fear crawled down her spine and dug a pit in her stomach.

Shots rang out, followed by a wild ululation. Crow wolves poured down from the bluffs, whipping their ponies into a run. Shock made each detail impossibly sharp. A wounded wolf rode past the Magpie, swaying in his saddle and holding his side. His eyes were glazed. Flecks of spittle flew from his lips—red blood welled up between his fingers, like in a Medicine man's trick.

Strange riders spilled out of the draws, demons springing straight from Grandmother Earth, wearing war bonnets or half-masks with the faces of animals, waving lances and eight-foot tomahawks. For all her fear and anticipation, she did not understand who they were, until men cried out, "Sioux, Sioux!"

Mesmerized, she sat helpless on her borrowed mare. Long Knives darted about like blue butterflies drunk on loco weed, chasing their horses and mules, trying to mount. Others stood stock still, wanting someone to tell them what to do. Crows and Snakes charged straight up the benches to meet the oncoming Sioux, waving their weapons and making horrid noises in their throats. It seemed that they must be swallowed up by so many enemy. Masses of men and ponies met with a sickening crash—a terrible amalgam of shots, yells, and screaming mounts. The Magpie saw Long Knives scramble up onto the benches in the wake of the Crows and Snakes; mostly on foot, shooting as they went. She hoped they were firing high. Yellow-eyes could never tell one warrior from another.

Not happy to be targets for both sides, Crows turned and galloped back. As they returned, she expected to see empty saddles and slopes littered with the fallen, but the Crows came back carrying no dead and leaving no bodies behind. It amazed the Magpie that hundreds could meet thousands—fighting hand to hand—without losing anyone. Sioux came pounding down from the bluffs on either side of the Crows, whooping and shouting "Hoka hey." Again she expected a massacre, but they turned about as soon as the Long Knives formed a firing line. The fight dissolved into private shows by single braves attempting to draw the troopers forward with feigned retreats and feats of daring. An enemy rider would break from cover, hanging behind his mount with only a leg showing, firing from under the pony's neck or trying to touch the troopers. As that warrior dashed off, another would emerge to put on his own display of devil-may-care riding at breakneck speed. The cavalry's continuous firing deafened the Magpie, but did not seem to disturb the Sioux.

Shaken and weak, terrified almost to tears, she had done nothing to avenge her brother. She had not gone up the bluffs. Her coup stick had not touched the enemy. She could not even claim to have been close to death, since there had been so little killing.

A band of Long Knives rode up, with chief's stripes on their pant legs. Among them was a tall old man with a funny braided beard who wore plain pants and a battered slouch hat—the Magpie thought the silly man in the shabby coat was a mule skinner, until men said this was Three Stars, the Long Knife big chief. A squawman rode over to tell the Crows it was time to turn their backs on the Sioux, to continue downriver into the canyon where the bluffs came closest to the stream. Warriors made the pinwheel motion beside their heads—the Long Knife leader was mad or crazy drunk. If the firing line opened up, thousands of angry Sioux would swarm down from the bluffs like hornets from a broken hive. The Crows and Long Knives could never negotiate the thickly timbered canyon with Crazy Horse hanging on their heels. This was the worst possible moment for Three Stars to get lost in the woods.

Crows flatly refused to move. A Snake boy who had been holding the horses ran up to Rattler, begging to be allowed to fight. Rattler agreed, and the boy ran off to paint himself. There would be no safety anywhere if the Long Knives opened the line. The Magpie realized that she too was going to be thrust into battle, brave or not.

Long Knives mounted up, pulling out of line, heading downriver, leaving a yawning gap. If Sitting Bull himself had commanded the Long Knives, he could not have done more to wreck their line. With a whoop and holler, Sioux streamed toward the opening, blowing their eagle bone whistles and firing from the saddle. Crows braced themselves. Men around the Magpie sang their death songs. As she resigned herself to death, she saw her Captain ride up with Plenty Good at his side. The Captain was wild-eyed, waving his arms like a man with a wasp in his pants, shouting orders in English. From his excitement, the Magpie guessed that he too was disobeying Three Stars. She was proud to see him act like a thinking man.

Plenty Good had the sense to speak Crow, "Come on, you Crazy Dogs, an' ready-to-die Lumpwoods, don't let Rattler get ahead of you!" He pointed to the Snakes, already catapulting themselves at the onrushing Sioux.

The Magpie kicked her pony and rode over to her Captain. Nothing could stop the Sioux from coming through, and she wanted to die beside him. He smiled at her, saying, "Howdy Mam," looking shocked and shy, oddly formal given the havoc around them. "That's a girl," yelled Plenty Good. He had lost the pipe he carried in his hatband. "Get moving! No Sioux can hit nothin' smaller than a buffalo from horseback. Crazy Horse hisself jumps off to shoot." The squawman turned in his saddle to shout at the Crows, "Let's *go*, Lumpwoods! Gonna let girls an' Snakes get ahead of you?"

Sioux were swarming out of the draws, gaining momentum, singing their own death songs. Her Captain led the Crows right at them, firing his revolver, shouting more meaningless orders. The Magpie was shouting too, but she did not know what. Every word, every thought, was swallowed by the inferno of buzzing bullets, rearing ponies, blinding dust, and multicolored horsemen. Sioux slammed into the Crows, screaming "Hwoon, hwoon," swinging tomahawks round their heads, trying to beat them from the saddle.

Somehow they broke through to the Snakes. The Magpie saw Rattler stripped to the waist, wearing a feathered bonnet that swept all the way to the ground. The Great Snake had seen seventy winters, but fought like a warrior in his prime. Long Knives were with the Snakes, fighting in isolated groups against terrible odds. She reined in her black mare, breathing dust, her heart beating like a bird in a snare. She had lost her Captain. Was he hurt? Killed? Her coup stick had still not touched the enemy, and she certainly did not have a scalp. Sioux were all about her, shooting and showing off their trick riding. None were offering up their hair.

A Long Knife leader rode back and forth, trying to reform the firing line. Suddenly he reeled in the saddle, shot through the face. His jaw dropped against his chest, blood gushed out of his mouth. For a moment he stayed mounted, then he toppled. Long Knives around him broke and ran.

She rode anxiously up to him, but the wounded man was not her Captain.

Bull Snake burst past her, painted black and yellow like a real bull snake. He jerked instantly backward, somersaulting off his mount in an absurd display of horsemanship—not until he hit the ground did she realize that he'd been shot. The Lumpwood chief flopped like a fish on land, his handsome features twisted. Sioux came storming up to count coup and take scalps from the fallen. She felt helpless to stop them.

A big figure dashed forward, dismounting beside Bull Snake. It took a moment for the Magpie to recognize Finds-and-Kills, still disguised as a man. Standing over the fallen warrior, she fired her Sharps Sporter as fast as she could work the trap breech.

The Magpie had to decide. She could run with the Long Knives, or die beside her friend—there were no other choices. Kicking her pony, she felt a sudden surge of courage. The Sioux could do no worse than kill her, and they had already done that to her brother. For the first time that day, her mouth ran wet with saliva. Having no weapon, she spit at the charging Sioux, showing how she did not fear them. Circling in front of Finds-and-Kills she shouted, *"Spit is my arrow. I dare you to face it."*

The lead Sioux took her up, nocking a wicked war arrow—its barbed head fixed flat to slide between her ribs. He dropped down on the far side of his horse where Finds-and-Kills could not hit him, showing nothing but his left foot.

The Magpie charged forward, putting all her fear into her lungs, screaming as she swung the coup stick around her head. Her yell startled the man's pony, a beautiful bay with dainty white stockings. The bay turned sharply, not willing to play toss-the-pony with a wild-eyed woman.

Hanging by his left foot, holding both bow and arrow, the Sioux struggled to stay with his horse. His foot slipped and he fell. The white-stockinged bay bounded off.

Scrambling upright, the man took aim at the Magpie—she saw the big barbed point, and behind it the man's eye, sighting on her breast.

Finds-and-Kill's buffalo gun boomed. The Sioux flipped over, bow and arrow flying in different directions. Finds-and-Kills was a formidable shot, who could place a bullet as carefully as a stitch—her shells were painted yellow and blue to add to their Medicine. The Sioux did not so much as twitch.

The Other Magpie dismounted and gingerly whacked the man with her coup stick. He was sure-enough dead. She drew the steel sliver that had taken off her finger. Bending down, she made a neat cut along the man's hairline, running across his forehead and above his ears. She grabbed the man's hair and pulled back. There was a gruesome ripping. A lifetime of skinning animals made the task easy, if not pleasant. She slashed through the last flap of skin and the scalp came off in her hand.

She stood up with the man's bloody skin and hair in her hand. He was her enemy, who had tried to kill her, but her hate evaporated into vast emptiness. A warrior would be taking his bow as well, but she could not even look at the corpse. She swung back onto her mount.

Finds-and-Kills was still firing, keeping the Sioux back. Two tall Snakes, one wearing a jaguar-skin headdress, stood over the fallen Long Knife chief, a pair of panthers holding the buzzards at bay. Lumpwoods were hauling Bull Snake away by the heels. Her Captain came up, rallying the Long Knives, forming a new firing line.

She had the hair her brother needed. *Her* fight was over—but the battle was on. Sitting on her horse, chest heaving, she saw two dismounted Long Knives running in terror for the safety of the reformed firing line. A pair of Cheyenne split off from the Sioux, tearing after the two men.

Crows mustered for a counter-charge. The Magpie braved herself to go with them. But then a squawman came riding up, yelling in Crow—Three Stars wanted everyone to fall back. Anxious as she was to leave, the Magpie was disgusted. She saw the two Cheyenne catch up with the running soldiers. The frightened men raised their hands in surrender, offering their guns to the Cheyenne—who took them eagerly, turning them on the terrified soldiers, shooting them down with their own weapons. Then they leaped off their horses and began to prune body parts in typical Cheyenne fashion.

The Magpie felt mortified. Glittering piles of cartridges marked the line they were leaving. Soldiers had spilled the shells from their pouches to have bullets ready at hand. Now they were abandoning the ammunition, to be scooped up by the Sioux and someday fired at the Crows. Long Knives seemed to care for nothing, leaving their bullets and weapons, their comrades dead and living.

Three Stars himself came up, looking more than ever like a load of old clothes flung on a post. He signed that the Crows should get ready to ride downriver into the wooded defile—not satisfied with his original blunder, he was hell-bent to repeat it. White Feather swept Three Stars' suggestion aside, signing, "What is the use of going further, if you will not fight here?" Completely obsessed, Three Stars acted like an old man with only one idea left in his head, pointing at the canyon, claiming Crazy Horse's camp was somewhere downstream.

White Feather laughed. He turned his chin toward the Sioux swarming on the heights, practically encircling them—"Here is a petty war party, a thousand, two thousand; I had no time to count. Go downriver to their camps, you will find more Sioux than there are leaves of grass." He rubbed his palms together imitating a woman grinding seeds between two stones. "They will rub you out." After seeing the silly show Three Stars had put on, no Crow was about to ride into a blind canyon looking for Crazy Horse.

Ashamed for her Captain, the Magpie rode slowly back to the little stream where they had left the led horses. They were gone. The Snake boy who had been watching the ponies lay by the brook, his face half painted, his bare skull white and bloody. When Three Stars opened the line, Sioux had ridden through, shot the boy, and scalped him.

Three Stars kept threatening to ride into the canyon, looking for Crazy Horse. But when he counted his men, he found that he had scores of wounded who he could not take into battle, or leave behind for the Sioux. So he changed his mind, and everyone trooped back to the Forks of the Goose—not a moment too quick for the Crows. The next day they rode off up the Tongue. Sioux country was no place to blunder aimlessly about. The Magpie had avenged her brother, taken a scalp, and fought beside her Captain, but it all tasted of ashes.

> *The little soldier chief (Maj. Reno) ran away, knowing how the fight would end. My man, Goes Ahead, rode down Medicine Tail Coulee with Son of the Morning Star. He heard the Sioux shout, "Go back, go back. You are dead men."*
>
> —*Pretty Shield*

Little Big Horn

Dawn sky on midsummer's day was the color of a newly cast skillet; snow lay in the shadows between the trees, but the great Medicine Wheel was blown completely clear. The Other Magpie sat by the northwest cairn, watching the sun rise over the stone hub, her face painted black to show that the fires of revenge had burnt down to embers. She laid her last hank of Sioux hair on the flames of a small fire—the rest of the scalp had been cut up so important members of the war party could all have a piece to dance with. Bull Snake was shot through both hips, in no shape to scalp dance or strut before the women, but even Old Crow, shot in the knee cap, managed to hobble about with the dancers.

The smell of singed hair and burning flesh filled the air, and her brother's spirit appeared, striding purposefully out of the hub of the Wheel with the dawn behind him. For the first time she saw his ghost in daylight, fully fleshed out, hair restored, no longer a wraith. Each time she saw him, he seemed to take on substance, becoming the strong young man she remembered.

"Sister, see what you have done for me."

The Magpie felt whole as well, able to look straight at him, sure she had earned forgiveness. "Brother," she told him, "I must ask something of you." Crows considered ghosts troublesome, but able to be helpful—if they wished.

"Ask, sister."

"I want my brother's permission to marry."

"You have my permission, even if he is too poor to give ponies." Her brother was not near as proprietary as when he was alive—no longer needing horses to ride, or women to tend his tipi. *"Just so long as he has not shamed himself in battle, or taken back a runaway wife."*

"He is the Yellow-eye Captain who rode beside me at the Rosebud. We know he is brave in battle, and he must have ponies since all Yellow-eyes are rich. I do not know how many wives he has, or if any have run off."

The ghost looked grim. *"Sister, you must choose another."*

"Why? I have earned the right to pick my man." Would no one let her have her way?

"You have," her brother agreed, *"but this Long Knife Captain will soon be dead."*

"Dead?"

"Already they are making a feast for him in the Camp of the Dead." Her brother turned his chin toward the rising sun. *"The Long Knives have lost themselves again. Right now this Captain and Plenty Good are in the Wolf Mountains, trying to slink past Crazy Horse's village which they think is on the Rosebud. Three Stars has sent them to find No-Hip-Bone and Son of the Morning Star—but the Sioux have left the Valley of the Rosebud, and crossed the Wolf Mountains to camp along the Little Big Horn. It is Son of the Morning Star and his Long Knives who are headed down the Rosebud."* Three Stars' confusion was complete—Son of the Morning Star was where he thought Crazy Horse was; the most foolish Lumpwood Without a Sweetheart knew more of war. And her Captain was on an idiot's errand, going the wrong way around the Sioux camps.

"We must help him." The Magpie had no faith that the two Yellow-eyes could find their way through Sioux Country on their own.

"We must?"

"Yes, you owe me that."

Her brother's smile turned benevolent. *"Yes, you have earned this. Before I go into the Beyond, I will unite you with your Captain, and help him find Son of the Morning Star."*

Finds-and-Kills waited below the shoulder of Medicine Mountain, wearing women's clothes again. When the Magpie walked into camp with her brother, the big woman said nothing, and did not seem shocked—the Magpie guessed that her friend could not see the ghost. Just as well. She explained what had happened on the Medicine Wheel, and how she had to find her Captain.

Finds-and-Kills listened, then sighed, seeing yet another insane venture ahead—"You have a brave and foolish nature that leads you into mischief. But you stood by me, when I fought as a man. If you must do this, I will do it with you." The Magpie added that Plenty Good was with her Captain, so they both had a man to look forward to if they were so lucky as to get through Sioux Country alive.

Even guided by her brother's spirit, it took days to track Plenty Good and the Captain through deep ravines crisscrossed by Sioux trails. They finally found the two men holed up in a cottonwood draw, afraid to travel by day or make a fire, drinking cold coffee with their guns in their laps. Plenty Good saw them first, slapping her Captain on the knee. "Hot damn, sir, it's our honeys!"

The Captain responded with one of his short vehement prayers. "Jesus, what are *they* doing here? How'd they ever find us?"

Finds-and-Kills was suddenly shy in the squawman's presence—so the Magpie spoke for both of them, telling Plenty Good as much as she considered safe. She did not want to scare him by mentioning her brother's spirit, though the ghost was standing a few feet away, studying her Captain. A spirit person could stare all he wanted without seeming impolite.

Plenty Good turned to the Captain, shaking his head. "Got any of that bacca left? This needs a smoke."

The Captain fished out a pouch of pipe tobacco.

"Appears these women have come to lead us to Custer." Custer was what the Yellow-eyes called Son of the Morning Star.

"Did General Crook send them?" The Magpie could hear disbelief in her Captain's voice—Crook was their name for Three Stars.

"No." Plenty Good took the pouch. "Crook's still sittin' by Goose Creek, his head up his arse, fishing for trout an' wonderin' where Terry and Custer might be. But these women say Custer has cut hisself loose and is coming down the Rosebud alone."

"Do you believe that, T-Bone?"

Plenty Good got out a bit of paper and rolled a *cigarillo* from the pipe tobacco. "Yew askin' me if I believe General George A. Custer would cut loose from Gibbon and Terry, an' go riding off on his own, to take on half the Sioux Nation with nothing but the 7th Cavalry and a pair of bulldog revolvers?"

"I suppose it was a silly question," the Captain grimaced. "Custer will kill his horses to be in at the death."

Plenty Good licked the *cigarillo*, taking a long look toward the Rosebud. "But yew can bet your pants bottoms ol' Son of the Morning Gun don't know Crook ain't comin' north to meet him."

"Then it's our duty to tell him."

The trapper tapped the white tube against his thumbnail. "Suppose that's what we're paid our four-bits a day for."

"Do you think these women can find Custer?" The Captain gave the Magpie and Finds-and-Kills an uneasy look. "I hate to drag them into danger."

"They found *us* easy enough, and I thought we were damn well cached.

Besides, they are already *in* danger. We all are. I'll tell you plain, I don't take to traipsing after Custer. That man has killed more cavalry than the cholera. If we pitch into *beaucoup* Sioux, I'll figure I've earned my fifty cents, an' Son of the Morning Star can look out for hisself." He stared down at the *cigarillo* in his hand. "Got a locofoco to light this?" The Captain handed him a match, and they passed the burning paper like a pipe.

Plenty Good was dead against moving during daylight, saying there was way too much "sign" around, so they rested until the sun went down, leaving a red streak of war paint above the western hills. Mounting up, the Magpie managed a private conference with her brother. *"Do not worry,"* the spirit assured her, *"I see with the eyes of an owl. I can guide you as well in the dark as in daylight."*

"We will not miss Son of the Morning Star?" The Magpie knew how easy it was for Long Knives to get lost.

"I will lead you right to him."

But about midnight, descending a plum-choked canyon, the Magpie heard Plenty Good mutter, "I smell woodsmoke." All four froze atop their horses. The Magpie strained to see over the plum bushes.

Tipi ears showed against the sky. Shots rattled from the thicket. She realized they had ridden right into a Sioux camp. The trapper yelled, "Cache yourselves," grabbing Finds-and-Kills' bridle, leading her up a bank, crashing through the brambles and plum brush. The Magpie tried to follow, but Plenty Good soon outdistanced both her and the Sioux. She "cached" herself and her Captain in the dense thicket, waiting for dawn, no longer trusting her brother's owl eyes.

"How could you have missed those Sioux?" she whispered. Spirits are supposed to be superhuman, above stupid mistakes.

"I did not miss them; they missed us," her brother chuckled. *"It was like when we chased the buffalo through camp."* It was hard to get a ghost to take life seriously.

"But now we have lost Finds-and-Kills and Plenty Good."

"No harm will come to them."

The Magpie stopped arguing, afraid her whispers would wake her Captain, making him think she was crazy. How could she explain her spirit brother to a Long Knife who did not know Crow? Instead she curled up and slept, saving her strength for the long morning.

In the Moon of Midsummer, there is hardly any night. First light edged over the rim of the world. The Magpie fed her Captain pounded meat, mixed with berries and kidney fat, along with a rather tasteless root that grows in the Big Horns. Etiquette called for them to eat apart, but the Magpie decided that was absurd. Her man was properly thankful, nodding his head, smacking his lips, saying, "Not Delmonico's, but it beats hardtack and uncooked bacon." Tipping his white hat back, he looked right at her, the way a Yellow-eye will. "You know Delmonico's, don't you? Steak house in New York?"

She could see by his smile that he thought they were alone and enjoyed being forward. She returned the smile, though it was hardly the time to copulate—not when the mosquitos were up and half the Sioux Nation might be watching.

A little encouragement went a long way. The Captain's idiot grin grew wider. "No, I guess you don't know Delmonico's." He shook his head, saying a short morning prayer. "God, how do I get myself into these things—all alone with a girl I can't talk to, and a few thousand Sioux!"

Her brother stepped between them, acting as ghostly chaperon. *"Son of the Morning Star is stirring, by midday he will be moving."*

The Magpie made the sign for Morning Star, holding her hand up toward the star itself, still visible in the predawn.

"Venus?" Her Captain nodded vigorously. "Sure, the Morning Star, that means Custer, right?"

She crooked her finger to show him the sign for agreement. Then they mounted up and headed for the Valley of the Rosebud, with her brother riding her led horse, the black mare she had ridden at the Rosebud. It was strange to have the two men she cared most about riding beside her—only one of them able to see the other. The valley was silent, smelling of roses and crab apples. No smoke hovered in the morning air. Her brother led them across to the west bank, where the wind blew the mosquitoes away. Then he turned south. Her Captain's impulse was to collect the straying mare and head downstream, where No-Hip-Bone would be waiting. The Magpie had to dismount in the half-light and show him the ironshod hoofprints headed upstream. Hundreds of American horses had passed not long ago, going south.

"Son of the Morning Star?" asked her Captain, making the sign she had shown him: holding up his hand, thumb and forefinger forming a circle, tapping the two fingers together to indicate twinkling.

She smiled, turning his arm about until it pointed to where the dawn had been. Then she crooked her finger.

"Have to say I'm learning quickly," her Captain smiled, plainly enjoying the finger-play and physical contact. They headed up the Rosebud, following the ghost-ridden pony. Where the valley widened, the Magpie saw the remains of tipi rings, surrounded by skeletal wickiup frames. Grass was cropped to the roots and covered with pony droppings. She made the cutthroat sign, saying "Sioux," opening and closing her hands many times so the Captain could know there were more than could be counted.

The Captain turned in his saddle, looking around, "Right, *beaucoup* Sioux. But where is *Custer?*"

Upstream, they found a giant twenty-eight pole Sundance lodge, laid out like the Medicine Wheel. Everywhere were signs that the Sundance had been cut short, with rituals half-completed. Ax heads and cooking pots lay hastily abandoned. A scalp hung from the Sundance Lodge. If that were not enough of a warning, some Sioux had drawn a row of men head down in the sand, ringed by horseshoe prints so you knew that they were Long Knives.

"Primitive art." Her Captain smiled at the sand drawing. "The guy wasn't Rembrandt. He got it upside down."

Head down meant dead. The Sioux were supremely confident—with good reason, so far as the Magpie could see. Where the trail mounted the divide, headed for the Little Big Horn, the ironshod tracks were surrounded by thousands of pony prints and travois ruts. So many lodgepoles had been dragged over the divide that in places it looked like a plowed field.

They followed the trail west, into the direction of death and sunset. By late morning, they found the first body, face down in a dusty alkali draw, circled by turkey vultures. Her Captain dismounted, turning the dead person over. He was a Sioux boy, shot through both lungs; buzzards and magpies had already been at him. Her Captain remounted, showing her something he had found under the body. "It's hardtack," he crumbled the slab in his hand. The Magpie did not want to touch either the dead boy or the Long Knife bread—both looked to be very bad luck.

He paused, pointing his thumb back down the creek. "That boy back there. Is he Sioux?"

"Hunkpapa Sioux," replied the Magpie, signing as she spoke. "Maybe Sitting Bull's band."

"I suppose all that means yes. He is not long dead."

A rising sun baked the trail. Near to noon, they reached the watershed and climbed a tall spire called the Crow's Nest, to get a good look over the dry arroyos and grassy mesas. A thin haze from hundreds of cookfires hung over the Valley of the Little Big Horn. Through the haze, the Magpie saw pony herds blanketing the prairie, wriggling like brown worms in the sun. From the size of the herds, the village had to be immense.

Her Captain saw nothing but haze, so she pointed to dust trails moving through the badlands closer at hand, signing, "Son of the Morning Star."

"Custer? Really?" The Captain shaded his eyes, "Great, I'll get the horses." He clambered eagerly down the spire. When he was gone, she asked her brother if there were Crows with Son of the Morning Star, not trusting Yellow-eyes to see how many Sioux lay ahead.

"Oh yes," he assured her, *"Half-Yellow Face is with him, also White Swan, Hairy Moccasin, Goes Ahead, White-Man-Runs-Him, and the boy Curly."*

Further off, she saw the white flash of pronghorns fleeing from smaller dust devils, little whirlwinds moving north and south of the Long Knife columns. She asked what his spirit vision made of them.

"Sioux," he pointed with his chin, *"and Little Wolf's Cheyenne."*

"You can get us through them?" She looked back at the huge pony herds crawling over the benches along the Little Big Horn. They had to move fast, before the Sioux got angry.

"I will get you to Son of the Morning Star," the ghost promised.

"In daylight? No more owl eyes nonsense?" She was not forgetting the fright he had given her.

"By midafternoon, before he reaches the big village by the Little Big Horn."

Descending the spire, she found her Captain in an agitated state, trying to make coffee over a tiny fire, anxious to press on. She explained with words and signs about the hostiles around them, but assured him she would get them through to Son of the Morning Star.

"Right," he nodded, "*beaucoup* Sioux, but we can get through to Custer." He took a sip of his half-brewed coffee, and spit it out.

"Bad water," signed the Magpie, cupping her hand to drink then making a throw-away motion—streams trickling down the divide were shallow and alkali.

"Bitter as a mule's behind," her Captain agreed. He poured the coffee into the ground, and they mounted up.

The bleak sameness of the badlands hid sharp turnings and sudden folds in the earth. The Magpie watched the winding trails of ironshod hooves diverge, a smaller trickle of horseshoe prints turning southward, but her brother led them straight on, following the greater stream. Sage and buffalo grass gave way to ash and cottonwood as they entered a shallow canyon. The bottom was mostly dry, with a few swampy mud holes surrounded by red-tipped paintbrush. Smoke drifted up the canyon.

At each turning, the Magpie tensed, expecting to see Sioux. Instead they came upon a second scene as ghastly as the dead boy in the draw. In the middle of the wash was a burning tipi, a burial lodge with its hide cover consumed by flames. Tongues of fire climbed the burial scaffold, which was collapsing under the weight of the body wrapped in buffalo skins.

The Magpie looked quickly away. Here the tracks of the Long Knives split again. And again her brother followed the larger path, but the stream of hoofprints had shrunk almost by half. She told her Captain, "Son of the Morning Star scatters his men like sparrows before a storm."

"Custer?" He looked puzzled. "But where is he?"

She nodded toward the empty slopes ahead, where shortgrass bluffs ran parallel to the river, like the spines of long dead animals. Dust hung in the air, and summer flowers were trampled by the passage of hundreds of horses.

As they mounted the bluffs, the Magpie heard firing coming from the Valley of the Little Big Horn. She turned her horse to get a look.

Her brother tried to stop her, *"Do not turn aside, sister. We can get to Son of the Morning Star before he reaches the village."*

"I must see for myself," she shouted.

"The trail goes straight ahead."

"There is fighting in the valley," she insisted. The firing grew, sounding like a ripping blanket.

The Captain looked surprised by her burst of loud one-sided conversation, but he turned his horse to follow. Climbing the back of the bluffs, she saw her first Long Knife, standing over his fallen horse, hitting the tired beast, trying to get his mount to rise. Man and horse seemed half-asleep until her Captain stopped to shout, "Where's Custer?" The man waved toward the head of Medicine Tail Coulee.

Reaching the ridge, the Magpie looked down into the Valley of the Little Big Horn. Slopes dotted with bunch grass danced in the heat. Blackbirds with bright red wing flashes flitted between wild sunflowers and patches of buffalo beans. Beyond the red-wing blackbirds, a white sea of tipis stretched downriver, camp circle following camp circle, until the lodge tops were lost in the haze of cookfires—each circle had hundreds of lodges: Hunkpapas, Minniconjous, No Bows, Oglalas, plus the Cheyenne, Santee Dakota, and smaller bands. At the near end of the village, she saw a small knot of Long Knives fleeing for their lives, trying to reach the bluffs. Warriors rode in and around them, whooping and killing.

Shaken, she turned to her brother. "Is Son of the Morning Star down there?"

"No, he is ahead, descending Medicine Tail Coulee." Both their horses dripped sweat, nipping grass tops in the windless heat.

"But he will be rubbed out!" A handful of Crows, a few hundred Long Knives, facing thousands of Sioux and Cheyenne—what other result was possible?

Her brother looked grave. *"Yes, he will be rubbed out."*

"Then why are you taking us to him?"

"Sister, I must go into the Beyond; so must Son of the Morning Star. Now you and your Captain can come with us."

The Magpie stared at her brother, hardly believing. One look back into the valley took the mist from her eyes. She saw where he had been leading her. No ghost can ever be trusted—they are of the dead. "Go," she told him, "you are dead. We don't want you."

Her brother looked hurt and anguished. *"I love you, sister. I do not want to go into the Beyond without you."*

She saw stems of wheatgrass appear behind him, showing through his body. "Go," she repeated, "You belong in the Beyond. We do not want you back."

"Sister, I fear to go alone." He faded, his smoky image reaching out to her, imploring. A gust of ghost wind wrapped him up and whipped him away.

Sadness replaced anger. She whispered, "Someday I'll join you." But not now—she leaped onto the black mare, who had carried only a ghost all day, dashing down the hill.

The Captain pointed to where Medicine Tail Coulee split the bluffs. "That trooper claimed Custer went that way." Whatever he was saying was utterly unimportant. The Magpie did not pretend to listen. Grabbing his reins, she dug her heels into her mare's flanks, making the signs for many Sioux, turning him toward the pine ridges to the east. They pounded down the bluffs and up a snakeheaded draw.

"Well, yes," her Captain gasped, "there are many Sioux, but Custer's command is right here." He waved toward Medicine Tail Coulee. From the top of the draw they could see a line of troopers waiting on big bay horses. She had no time to pay polite attention, and tugged harder on his reins, dragging him toward a line of pines. He kept turning his head, trying to see what was happening on the bluffs above the Little Big Horn.

The column waiting by the coulee advanced along the crest, becoming enveloped by dust and gunsmoke. Soon the only riders they could see were Cheyenne and Hunkpapas whirling around the cloud of dust, darting in and out like swallows. "Well *damn*," he complained, "We'll never get to Custer *now!*"

Pines closed around them. For a time, they could still hear the gunfire—it lasted for as long as it would take a leisurely man to load and smoke a pipe.

In the dry bluffs above Tulloch's Fork, a lone Crow in war paint came over the crest, riding with deliberate haste, his tired pony taking the slope in slow motion. Seeing the oncoming brave, the Captain clawed at his holster. The Magpie stopped him before he got his pistol out. The rider was Curly, the boy who had gone with Grandmother's Knife to scout for No-Hip-Bone.

Curly was exhausted. His face, sharp and handsome as a hatchet, looked pale and drawn. His pony's flanks heaved.

"You are tired," the Magpie told him.

The boy gave her weary agreement, "We rode for half the night and most of the day behind Son of the Morning Star. No-Hip-Bone sent us to guide him, but he would not be guided."

"So where's Custer?" Her Captain inserted English into the conversation.

Curly did not understand, but the Magpie knew what her Captain was asking. "Where is Son of the Morning Star now?"

Curly ground his hands together, like a woman crushing seeds. "Rubbed out. He would not listen. He called us women. He was like a breath feather, blown to his fate. They are all dead men now."

Magpie had no signs to express the magnitude of what had happened, so she signed to her Captain, "Come, No-Hip-Bone will have someone who speaks." He seemed to understand, and they headed downstream toward the Big Horn, with Curly lagging behind on his tired horse. Dusk settled, and they lost the boy in the darkness.

By dawn the next day, they had reached the Big Horn. Finding a cold stream, she drank, inviting her Captain to do the same. "Thin your blood," she told him. "Our bodies are water." He drank, then turned politely away while she washed, showing that he was a man of feeling.

When she was done, she handed him her porcupine-tail brush, showing him with hand motions that she wanted him to brush her hair. Smiling, he sat behind her, using long even strokes on her wet hair. It was wonderful to sit, hips against his knees, feeling him stroke her hair, watching morning light shine on the water. Yellow butterflies sat on black-eyed susans by the bank, opening and closing their wings, warming themselves in the sun. Every woman's day should begin this way.

By the time her hair was shining, she saw a Fire Boat churning its way upstream beneath a pillar of smoke, and she knew that her delightful morning would end here. The Captain stood up when he saw the boat, handing her back her brush, looking embarrassed. She turned to face him, having important things to say. If he could not understand her words, he might at least see her feelings. "I am sorry that we will not copulate. You are a good man, you gathered wood with energy and you brushed my hair beautifully, but it is hard to be a Crow—being pretty, brave, and helpful is not enough. Each year the Yellow-eyes crowd closer, and the buffalo go away. I cannot live my life looking out for you, keeping you out of danger, finding you when you get lost. It is better for us if that Fire Boat takes you to your own people."

Her Captain stared at her, seeming dumbfounded by the speech. From the brush above came the, "Yak, yak, yak," of someone imitating a magpie. Finds-and-Kills and Plenty Good descending the draw, leading their horses. They too had seen the smoke from the Fire Boat. After an enthusiastic reunion, the Magpie turned her chin toward the Fire Boat, saying, "They will take you to No-Hip-Bone. You do not need us anymore." Plenty Good reckoned that was so, slapping Finds-and-Kills on the back, and offering his hand to the Magpie. She shook it. Then both women took their horses and headed west.

On the far bank of the Big Horn, they turned to take a last look at the Fire Boat—fine and impressive with its white woodwork, black-belching stacks, and its huge wheel whacking the water. The Magpie felt wistful, but Finds-and-Kills looked happy. Seeing her friend's smile, the Magpie asked, "Did you have a good time?"

"Oh yes," replied Finds-and-Kills. "Plenty Good is as good as his name."

On the deck of the steamer *Far West*, moored to a cottonwood at the mouth of the Little Big Horn, the Captain told his story to Plenty Good.

"She led me almost to Custer—then, when we got to the bluffs by the Little Big Horn, she started acting crazy, talking to herself, holding loud conversations with the air. She got angry, turned around, and brought me straight here. It was almighty strange, even for an Indian."

Plenty Good agreed that you could never tell what a Crow would do.

"Then she had me brush her hair. I thought I did a damned good job, too—but when I was done, she gives me a long lecture in Crow, and rides off. Can't figure out why. I thought she liked me."

"That's yer high-toned Crow virgin," Plenty Good laughed. "Yew were lucky to come away with both balls."

The Captain raised an eyebrow, "Well, how did *you* do, T-Bone?"

The squawman smiled, "Well enuff. Hell, I knew right off me an' that big'un had itches in common. When I got her in the brush, this hoss was almighty surprised to see just how *much* we had in common. But I'd say our itches are well-scratched."

The Captain called Plenty Good a sly bastard, clapping him on the back, saying that he wished he handled women half so well. The steamboat's tall stacks continued to draw stragglers—a sleepy Crow rode up on a tired horse. The Captain pointed him out to Plenty Good, "Hey, here's that boy we met."

The trapper took a look. "Damned if it ain't *Curly*, Gibbon's scout."

"Well, good, call to him. Find out where in the Hell Custer's gone to."

Hell, of course, is a Yellow-eye name for the Beyond. ●

FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES

The, which seems the merest particle,
In point of fact's a definite article—
The word we make more use of every day
Than any article except for *A*.

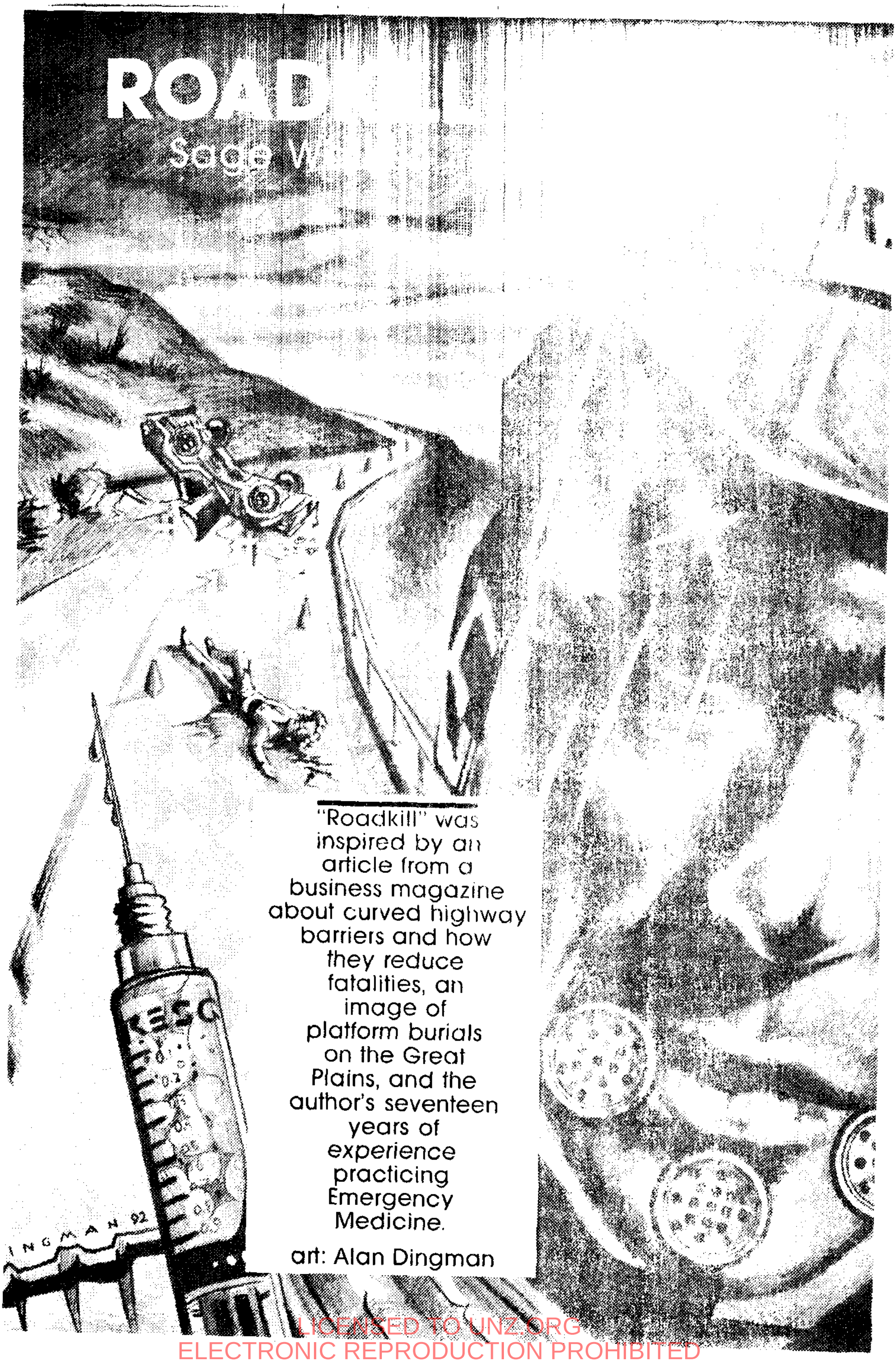
A's indefinite, as is *An*:
Nouns that have no other plan
For being something other than
A dog or cat, an ape or man
Must take the article they can.

But not *The* teddy bear I love,
For Paddington's a cut above
All other nouns. *A* wouldn't fit
A bear so dear and definite.

—Tom Disch

ROAD

Sage W



"Roadkill" was inspired by an article from a business magazine about curved highway barriers and how they reduce fatalities, an image of platform burials on the Great Plains, and the author's seventeen years of experience practicing Emergency Medicine.

art: Alan Dingman

Oklahoma fields feed the fenced-in cities.

Highways run past plowed miles of rich red earth and green winter wheat. The roads are guarded by walls of concrete taller than a man and the barriers have curved bases to force tires back into lanes. Eagles live on the plains, reintroduced, successful, and undisturbed. They feed from their fenced stretches of wilderness and from the wide strips of no-man's land that flank the highways. Trespassers are shot on sight.

Karl works nights and clings to day sleep, which is always deep but never deep enough. It's three in the afternoon. Karl is not sure what wakes him. He drifts into microsleep while he stands at the commode and wakes when his shin bangs against cold porcelain. November light coming through Karl's security-barred window, into the sagging farmhouse where he lives, is colored the same rich yellow as his piss.

Karl licks his sticky teeth and tries for a couple more hours sleep.

Graveyard, day, swing, his life limited by the three shifts of a medical day, Karl steps from the hospital employee van into winter cold, craving coffee. Shoulders hunched against night air, he walks toward the graveyard shift at County Hospital.

The ambulance shed glows with steamy light. Crews climb into and out of navy coveralls. Damned if you'd wear them on the street, not off duty. You stood a sure chance of being asked for handouts, drugs, or even worse, for help. "I got a sister, mister, she's gonna have a baby. You got vitamins, mister? You got milk powder?"

Karl works to keep his Level of Care card, he tells people. He tells himself he works because he is good at his job. Comforting the comfortless feeds a deep part of him. He tries to keep some human kindness in the system. And anyway, he is too tired, when he isn't working, to figure what *else* he could do.

Rollins says hello and angles his head at a girl Karl hasn't seen before. "Your rookie," Rollins says.

Karl remembers now, in the heat and noise of shift-change, that he has a new kid assigned to him. God, they get younger every year! The girl pulls her coverall up over her sleek brown back, rippling muscles under taut skin. Dewy, Karl thinks, tight. You couldn't pinch her if you tried. Contrasted all too clearly with his own slight paunch, the stray gray hairs in the pelt on his chest and belly.

She turns, the top of her head level with his shoulder. Her hair curls tight around her ears, and his fingers want to touch crisp curls, young skin. Damned old fool, he is. Her eyes are topaz brown; the whites carry a little stain of gold.

"Carita," Rollins names her.

"Hi," she says. "You my boss?" In a voice too smooth, rich as old honey.

"I'm your boss. Where'd you train, Carita?"

"University Hospital," she says.

"Good, good." She could probably read. He'd check later to find out if she could handle more than screen symbols. "Stay beside me, Carita, for now. If you got questions, ask 'em."

"But not before he gets his coffee," Miller says. The swing shift boss hands over a heavy mug, steaming black liquid life.

Monitors blink amber above the cluttered desk. Mikes crackle on the police channel. Bundles of Miller's needlepoint yarn cover the shift report, the log. The desk carries its usual clutter—a greasy wrench; three bolts of no known purpose; five felt-tipped pens, all dry.

"How's it running?" Karl asks.

"Nobody out, right now. Some new protocols came in from the Bureau. Seventeen's down again." Miller does not look up from her needlework. Her slender fingers push wheat-colored wool through tiny canvas spaces.

"I'll look at it." Unit 17, one of the last of the V-8's, and cranky. The old rig chokes on her governor, set at 65 MPH by federal law. Private cars are much, much faster.

A 10-55 call comes over the city mike. *Woman down, J. D.'s Full Service Grocery*. The dispatcher's voice is tense; she's a new one. "You're first up," Miller says.

"Come on, Carita. You drive." Karl swirls his coffee to cool it.

"Yes, sir." The girl's eyes are wide. She bolts for the ambulance bay.

"Wait!" Karl yells. The kid stops and turns to him. "Get in 23. Start it up." Anxious, the new ones are always anxious, and for a while they have blood-junkie hunger, a thirst for adrenaline. It passes. "I'll be right there." Reaching for the fresh pot of coffee, topping up his mug.

"I stashed some donuts in the bottom drawer. They're all yours." Miller stuffs her needlepoint into a satchel and swings it over her shoulder.

"You're the best." Karl fakes a punch to Miller's shoulder on his way to the rig.

Karl lifts his bulk into the right-hand seat and feels the springs give under his weight as he settles in for the ride. The dispatcher calls to tell them the patient is conscious.

"Ten-four," Karl says. The girl Carita stays silent and wheels the rig down the mercury-lit highway toward the Meridian exit. Two gates. The ambulance takes the one marked Residents, with a logo of a house. The rig's transmitted signal opens the gate for them. Two vans wait in the Visitors lane. Yawning drivers run their passenger's cards past bright colored logos that designate access to shopping, work, or visits to households. Adequate credit for the area, that's what the gate is for.

Shabby residential area, patched asphalt road. Rows of faded tract houses, dark City Van stations, quick-food stops. Not ritzy, not desperate, the way the world lives; Meridian is a street like a hundred others in the rusting city.

"Where you from, Carita?" Karl asks.

"Radiant Light," she says.

She's a chastity baby. Karl has never worked with a graduate of one of the homes established for them. He wonders how she will be, a child born of laws that say chastity is the only legal contraception. No known family, brought up behind fences and always, always, within earshot of other humans.

"Give your child a chance," the television ads beg, "Bring them to a Better Life Center," with their pictures of Moses baskets outside the one-way doors. Inside the steel buildings, rows of cribbed infants wail or sleep, fed four ounces every four hours. The girls who feed them wear earphones and dance to private music, tuned in and out. Karl works there sometimes, volunteers to go in and just walk down the lines of cribs, picking up, holding, saying "There, there." Over and over, "There, there."

A clerk in a bright green apron waits at J. D.'s front door, beckons, this way, this way. Karl pulls on his gloves and Carita reaches for hers. The gurney wheels lock down with a click; Carita follows Karl inside. She seems to have found her nerve, moves well, as if she remembers some of the training runs. *Don't look hurried*, the drill went. *Stay calm, so you can calm the bystanders.* A crowd of polyestered gawkers mumble in the aisle, their faces sickly in bluish fluorescent light. They cluster near racks of aspirin, cold remedies, laxatives.

On her back, blinking up in confusion, the patient's pale-blond hair fans across cold tiles. Young, jeans and rumpled shirt, a canvas sack beside her; college student, Karl figures.

"Did she fall?" Karl asks the crowd.

"No." A balding man in faded denim keeps his distance from the limp girl on the floor, rocks on the balls of his feet. "She just sort of sat down and didn't get up."

"I'm all right," the girl says. *"I'm just a little dizzy. Don't take me* anywhere, please."

Her skin is hot to touch; her pulse is 120 and thready to Karl's fingers.

"You look like you need help," Karl says.

Carita, unasked, sorts through the girl's canvas sack, tosses out a bag of trail mix, pencils, a purple comb, books. *Brave New World*, Karl sees, *Major British Writers*, thick and heavy. The girl's card zips across the counter at Carita's waist. Level of Care: 2. Which meant privileged, college student, most treatments accessible.

"If you can't walk out, honey, we have to take you in."

"I can walk." Lifting on a shaky elbow, sitting stunned, she tries to rise. She looks puzzled and closes her eyes. She sags back, Karl's arm already behind her to let her down easy.

"It's okay. Don't worry."

"Chandler, Kathleen. HIV negative," Carita says. Infection status is on the card, on everyone's card, if they have one. They lift Chandler onto the gurney and roll her toward the waiting rig. The manager clears the way for them.

"Nothing to see, folks," the manager says. "No problem. If you'd just step out of the way, ma'am?" Karl observes the man's sudden assumption of authority and hides a smile.

In the rig, kneeling beside the patient, Carita stays close by Karl's shoulder. Chandler's blood pressure is 90/50. Her pulse stays at 120, respirations 24, fast and deep; she's shocky. Thin chest, high ridges of ribs under white skin, her belly is rigid and tender. Karl unzips the jeans, sees fresh thin blood on the vaginal pad, smells musk.

"How much bleeding?" Karl asks.

Chandler goes slack, accepting defeat, maybe, or just too sick to lie. "Lots," she says.

"When was it done?"

Her jaw clamps behind pale lips. She closes her eyes.

"I'm not out to bust anyone, girl. Sometime in the last three days, I'd figure, if you're septic. Did you see anything that looked like a fetus?"

"No," she says. "Look, it's just the flu, okay?"

"Right," Karl says. "Can you get some Ringer's ready, Carita?" Tightening the tourniquet on the thin forearm, the dorsal vein on the wrist bulging up, easy. The rookie lifts the transparent fluid sack and floods the tubing. Good girl. "You want to start this one?"

"Yeah," Carita says. Her hands are not trembling. She slips the sharp catheter into the vein with a practiced junkie's thrust. Well, I'm damned, Karl thinks.

"I'll drive," Karl says.

Past the ranks of canvas cubicles, the clang and buzz of the night-time ER. "Septic AB?" Gallagher, the name tag reads, night-shift triage nurse. She's an old hand, in her late twenties, Karl figures, and at this for four years that he remembers. Her eyes glitter behind the transparent faceplate of the hood she wears, hooded, gloved, booted, as all of them are. Gallagher reaches for the flimsy Carita hands her, printout of a medical history recorded in murmuring voices on the drive into County, Carita's slurred accent throaty against the white girl's crisp television English.

"Vaginal bleeder," Karl says. "Fever, peripheral flushing." Endotoxic shock, he thinks, floods of bacterial poison from a punctured bowel or a dirty knife, or both. Carita's eyes scan the triage area, the rows of stretchers, and stop at a spot of dried thick blood on the tile near Gallagher's foot. The blood is old; not Chandler's. The Chandler girl keeps her eyes closed. A tech has come to the gurney at Gallagher's signal. He punches in data on a hand-held chart.

"Ultra-sound," Gallagher says. Karl nods and continues his journey to where he was headed anyway, but Gallagher must approve, as always.

In blue darkness, in cool monitor light, the X-ray tech moves a cold cone across the girl's belly. A fuzzy black-and-white crescent appears on the monitor; there's movement there.

"Alive," X-ray says to Carita. X-ray is flirting. Usually, he doesn't talk to anyone. "And kicking. Take her back."

"Fuck you." Slow, deliberate, with great effort, Chandler whispers the words.

Karl smiles and angles his chin toward the door. They transfer Chandler to a cubicle in the ER. Carita, puzzled, in the corridor where silent sheeted figures lie on gurneys, waiting their turns in X-ray, asks, "What's funny?"

"They'll treat her. Antibiotics, endotoxin antibodies, the works."

"And they let her die if she's managed to get rid of the kid?"

"No treatment for self-induced illness," Karl says. "You know the protocols." The list of excluded illnesses gets longer every year. Diminishing resources, increasing population. This is how it has to be. *Everything* triaged. Triage, *sorting*; the process tries to get early care for those who will benefit most from it. Triage, Karl remembers, was invented for casualties of war.

"Yeah," Carita says.

Tight jaw, a blink; as if she read a book. Carita knew shock as a term, as a set of parameters, could not yet know how close Chandler had been, was yet, to death. The night is young.

"Got a rig down," Karl says. "Come on." It's not so bad. We do what we can, he wanted to tell her.

The cold garage, a shop light's glare warm on his hands, Carita beside him looks wary at old 17's greasy innards. "It's always the carburetor," he says. "Or almost always." Two of the other rigs are out, the rescue team after a chest pain, white male, age sixty-five, the scoop and run boys on I-40, two private cars sideswiped on the designated tourist exit, one driver each.

The mike chatters at Karl's waist, calm dispatcher's voice accepting data, checking the chest pain's LOC card against the data bank.

Cancel, the dispatcher says, *on the chest pain*.

He's legal age. Rollins' exasperated voice comes back, a man with more seniority than the dispatcher, and he knows it. Treatment for myocardial infarction covered until age seventy, in hospital, new arteries, if needed. No problem.

Tobacco use in his records. 10-22 your call. Cancel the run.

A woman's voice wails in the background. Oh, no. Oh, no, that was years ago, for God's sake help him, he quit so long ago.

Shit, Rollins says. *He's already had his morphine.*

Home care instructions, the dispatcher says, *are indicated.*

New or not, the dispatcher is learning fast. "Hold this out of the way, would you?" Karl asks. Silky brown fingers lift the gritty hose with no hesitation. Karl is pleased that Carita does not flinch at the feel of the black grease on her hands. "Do you know what to tell the family, if you're there?" he asks.

"Aspirin," she says. "And four inches of hemorrhoid cream, by mouth, every four hours for three days."

"Right." Benzocaine helps prevent some arrythmias and can be obtained in hemorrhoid remedies. It is given orally because rectal stimulaton can precipitate the arrythmias the drug is meant to tame. So what if it tastes bad? It's cheap.

The doc on duty has changed his name from polysyllabic Asian to Tom Jones. He is round and cheery and smiles his way from stretcher to stretcher, but by 2 A.M. the smile is a little tight at the corners. A couple of 10-45's come in, accidents with injury. Either they are rich and can buy gasoline, or they're lucky enough to own part of a near-exhausted well and trade crude for gasohol. Some poor men still drive, Karl tells himself.

Inhabitants of privately owned cars get priority care; their arrival adds an hour to the waiting time for less acute patients. Karl leaves the trauma patients and walks the rows of stretchers to explain the delay. He hands out bedpans to a couple of patients conscious enough to use them. Never enough supplies, never enough bedpans; Karl gets them from Gallagher's private stash.

Carita stays at his side. "Is it always this bad?" she asks.

"This is a quiet night, so far. This is *calm*." Karl thinks about the night for a moment. "It's always like this," he says. "Always. Except when it's worse."

Karl's beeper calls them away to a fender-bender, then to an SOB call, shortness of breath in a huge woman who got too tired to wait in line for her diuretics last week. Oxygen helps her; Carita smiles. Carita hasn't made a mistake yet. Karl does not want her to be perfect. She's too calm, at least on the surface. But it's her first night and she's trying hard, he figures. They leave the woman propped sitting on a stretcher and take a man-down call at a bar.

They are led to a back room, dusky, where walk-in fridges stuffed with sweating cases of beer hum sine waves of white noise. The bartender points to a sodden figure on the floor, curled around a pool of blood. Male, thin, his vital signs are okay.

"Pool cue," the bartender says.

"Did he walk afterward?"

"Yeah. But he didn't make it home. I let him lay down here."

His card is good. Three separate jagged lacerations meet on top of the man's head. Karl's gloved hand slips across smooth wet skull; he feels silky scalp membranes but no jagged edges of bone. He wraps a clean paper sheet around the bloody scalp.

"You call this a stellate laceration," he tells Carita. "Like a star."

She looks at Karl as if he's crazy. They wheel the gurney out and the bartender reaches for a mop.

Tom Jones is finished with the road trauma when Karl and Carita bring in the drunk. Gallagher asks the doc to take a look at him. A line of dried blood runs from the corner of the man's mouth and vanishes under a grease-stiffened collar. Karl's nose itches. He reaches under his faceplate to scratch and lets in alcohol fumes and the reek of sour vomit. Karl fastens his faceplate again.

"Pool cue," Gallagher says. "Want a skull film?"

Tom Jones pulls on a fresh glove and explores the wound with his fingers. "Get away!" the man yells. He sits up and squints at the doc. "Sweet Jesus!" he says. "Don't I even get a *white* man?" He's not as drunk as Karl thought. He spits bloody mucus. The glob lands square on the front of the doc's chest.

"He's neurologically okay. The skull seems intact," Tom Jones says calmly. "I'll get to him in a while."

Still smiling, Tom Jones walks away and strips off his surgical gown. Gallagher has a clean one ready for him.

"Carita," Karl says, "if a man can talk and aim his spit, you know his brain is okay. If he hits the doc in the face, he gets two points on the GOMER scale."

Now her look plainly says he's crazy.

GOMER, Get Out of My Emergency Room. Karl explains the system, two points when a patient adjusts his own IV, five points if he adjusts the IV on the patient in the next bed. The system assigns points for wearing Toxic Socks and offers bonuses when blood alcohol levels exceed IQ's. The scale has been revised and refined by years of custom.

And Karl thinks, we joke because we *have* to. We keep on caring, keep our distance from the pain any way we can. To a newcomer, it looks damned weird. If I step back and think about it, it *is* damned weird.

The pool-cue man turns on his side, settles his arm beneath his head, and begins to snore.

"Why did they check his scalp?" Carita asks. "You could have told them it was okay."

"Protocol," Karl says. "You and I don't make decisions. *They* do. *We* follow protocols. That's how it is."

The loudspeakers call CODE BLUE, 14-A. Karl grabs Carita's arm and hustles to the cubicle where a monitor siren warns of cardiac arrest. Tom Jones reaches for an endotracheal tube. A tired-looking tech bends up and down, up and down, compressing the patient's chest.

Carita and Karl are not needed; enough helpers surround the stretcher. Karl backs away and pulls Carita with him. He's seen the girl's fine-boned foot, the fan of pale-blond hair on the pillow.

"Is it Chandler?" Carita asks.

"Yeah."

"Shouldn't she have gone to Intensive Care?" Carita asks.

"It's full," Gallagher snaps. She grabs the recording mike and calls out time, lapsed time, medications. And says, within a few minutes, "Code canceled, 0347."

Chandler is dead.

They find the safe room, bulletproof steel enclosure where the nurses take breaks, and sit down for coffee. Karl expects questions, expects some sort of reaction from Carita. She simply drinks the coffee he hands her and listens to the chatter. Her face is smooth, her eyes untroubled, and he figures she's hiding the new inputs, the death, somewhere deep inside. And he wants, cursing himself while he realizes it, he wants to comfort her when she lets go and sorrows for the dead girl. He wants to pass on the traditions of courage and effort in the face of death, the comfort of knowing that the best you can do is to follow the protocols and do what can be done. Sometimes it makes a difference.

Idle talk, keep-awake talk, falls and rises in the dead hours before dawn. Karl feels the bite of lactate in his tired muscles and wants very much to lie down. He can't, he never can, he feels that he will never sleep long enough to get to the next shift, and every morning at 4 A.M. he vows he'll get off work and sleep for a week. Sleep would be so good.

Carita touches his shoulder and he jerks awake. "Sorry," he says. The conversation turns to music. The X-ray tech quotes lyrics from a song he likes. Carita hums the melody. Her voice is true and full.

"Sing it," Karl says, surprised at how good she sounds, as if she has been trained for a stage.

She stands in the crowded, tired safe room, pulls in her breath, and pushes out glory. Carita sings with control and uses just enough volume to buzz the hairs on the back of Karl's neck. He thinks about waking next to her, how her sleek back would feel to his hands.

Don't shit where you work, he tells himself. Messing with crew had gotten him married once. And anyway, Carita is young enough to be his daughter.

Gallagher comes in half-way through Carita's song. She leans against the doorway. "You could be a star," Gallagher says in the ear-ringing silence when Carita stops.

"No good bet." Carita sits down and gulps coffee. "I can't eat dreams."

She could work crew in L.A., Karl thinks. The work there is no harder than it is here. She could audition for studio back-up work . . . if she had the money to get there, if she ever saved enough on the salary she's going to make. Right. *If.*

She is too quiet, this Carita. Still, he will have all the time he needs to get to know her, and sometimes the quiet ones talk too much, once they get started. There's no reason to rush.

0630; last call, Karl hopes. Sick baby calls shouldn't get past the dispatcher, but she doesn't know it yet. Karl is too tired to go througn it with her this late in the shift, figures that he can talk to her tonight. Sick baby. No damned good reason to call an ambulance, for the report hadn't mentioned respiratory distress. He expects fever, some damned woman whose kid has an earache and she can't sleep and figures nobody else should either.

The house is unpainted, and weeds grow tall in the yard. Karl yawns past a plastic tricycle on the porch, neon orange. A cat skitters away from a nest of tangled rags by the door. November cold, but there's no wind before dawn, and that helps. Nobody answers a knock; the tattered screen opens to his push.

The girl is about six, coughs green. She has the wan look of New Slim, HIV, the retrovirus in yet another elusive mutation. Not treatable. There is no safety mark inked on her upper arm, and she's old enough to be in school.

Karl turns the child's arm so Carita can see it. "Another one for the Sisters of Mercy," Karl tells her.

The child is alone in the house, or seems to be. Can't smell mildewed wood through mask filters, but Karl knows it's there, a legacy of years of mop-water on old wood. "You'll be fine, honey." *Sure* she will. She blinks up at his masked face, at Carita, and doesn't cry. Karl tucks a blanket around the little girl's thin shoulders. He finds a sugar-free candy in his pocket and hands it over. She takes it from his glove.

"I'll be right back," he says.

Carita goes to the porch. She has kept her hands folded in her armpits and she hasn't touched anything. Karl walks past her and pulls on a clean glove to reach in for the rig's mike.

Sisters of Mercy, the mike says.

"Pickup at 1412 East Reno," Karl says.

Carita stays outside. She may be antsy, Karl thinks, but the child will see it as cruel.

That you, Karl? the voice asks.

"Yeah," he says.

We'll be right there.

Carita climbs into the rig and sits down, yawning. I won't fuss at her, Karl decides, she's had a long night. Karl goes back into the house and sits down in a creaky rocker. He holds out his arms to the little girl and she comes to him and curls up in his lap. "There, there," he says. "There, there."

The Sisters of Mercy show up at 0710. Karl hears the van arrive and goes to the door, the child in his arms.

Three of them, this time, two male and one teen-aged girl, they have hollow and suffering eyes.

"She's alone," Karl tells them. They ask no questions. At least someone had called.

They reach for her with gentle hands and murmur precise syllables of reassurance. Their foreheads are marked with the deeply tattooed symbol of peace. Peace of a sort will be theirs shortly enough, Karl knows. The child had not cried at Karl's masked face but she shrinks away from the Sisters and whimpers.

"Go with them, honey. Okay?" Karl asks.

The child does not look up as she walks to the van.

"Hand out the dirty bag, would you?" Karl asks Carita. He'll strip in the yard. No way to hide this from the neighbors, and as he shivers in his underwear, he sees them waiting, buckets of waste oil in their hands. Karl stuffs his coverall into the dirty bag. Its yellow biohazard symbol glows in dawn light. Carita hands him a clean packaged coverall.

"You picked her up." Carita drives slowly back toward County. "You didn't have to do that."

"She was a little girl," Karl says. "She was scared."

"Yeah," Carita says.

Karl sees nothing in that smooth face. And looks away, for the babies are the hardest for him, always have been. They, too, are triaged.

But always *born*. As Carita was, and her mother had put her in a basket and walked away. Does this young and competent tech ever wonder about her mother? What does she think is wrong in the world? What does she think is *right?* Time-for-bed thoughts, Karl tells himself. The mind gets loose after a long night.

Twenty-three, you want some overtime this morning? the dispatcher asks before they swing into the Hospital exit lane.

"What is it?" Karl feels the usual wakefulness of early morning, an endocrine surge that doesn't go away even after years of night shifts.

Transfer to Fort Sill. Two patients. Stable.

"You want some extra money, Carita?"

"Wouldn't mind," she says. "I'm not sleepy."

"We'll take 'em," Karl says. Military patients get their care at military hospitals when possible; the feds pay the transfer costs. And the day shift will have to run short-staffed if Karl doesn't go; that's part of it.

The two soldiers have been in a beer brawl. One has a smashed nose, the other some broken knuckles and a possible orbital fracture. Maybe just a shiner, but the Army will take its own films to find out. Settled in the rig, the two boys fall asleep. Karl pulls the rig out into hurtful bright morning, onto the empty highway, and heads south.

Carita sits on the cooler wedged between the front seats, and faces the back of the rig so that she can keep an eye on the patients. She is close to Karl, and her shoulder touches his when the rig sways. Karl likes that.

Carita stares out the side windows. "It's empty out here," she says. She sounds scared.

"Just normal country," Karl says. "There's my house." Alone except for two Chinese elms naked behind it, the small frame house carries barred windows that look discouraging, but would pull out of the old wood real easy. "My dad sold the rest of the land, but that's still mine." In a convenient triangle of land that the automated harvesters didn't need.

"You live out here by *yourself?*"

"Yeah. I had a wife for a while. We never worked the same shifts, and I guess we sort of lost track of each other. She left."

"How do you get in to work?"

"The hospital van comes out and gets me," Karl says. "Costs me some, but less than city rent."

A convoy passes the ambulance, truck trains, carrying food and making time. They are going south and maybe west. Maybe to Los Angeles, Karl thinks.

"I've never been outside the city before," Carita says. Karl can't tell from her voice whether she's proud or ashamed about that.

"You don't live alone."

"No. Five of us from Radiant Light share an apartment. We're all readers, and we all got job trained."

"All girls?"

"Of course."

He wonders what they're taught about sex, about love. He wonders if they are taught to hate men, but Carita doesn't act scared of him. Of anyone.

"Why did you pick EMT training?" Karl asks.

"I didn't pick it, exactly. My aptitudes were okay, and Radiant Light paid for classes. I owe them, now that I'm working."

"Where did you learn to sing?"

"We do a lot of singing. Church songs, mostly."

"What you sang wasn't a church song."

"They let us use the headphones when we work with the babies." Carita smiles. "And we used to sneak the television on at night, when the dorm leaders went to sleep."

The satellite channels aren't *all* sanitized; some of them show some pretty strange stuff. Her world is shaped by fences and television, Karl thinks, but is mine so different?

Two hours south, the soldiers still sleeping, Carita does another status check on them and comes forward. "What's that?" she asks.

"A buffalo," Karl says.

"Big sucker, ain't it?"

"Fairly puny for a buffalo." In drier country, down here, the herds range over a lot of worn-out farms, kept in their corridors by the highway barriers. Good money in their meat, Karl has heard. He wonders how it tastes. Miller's donuts will be gone by now, devoured by the morning crew. And he didn't look over the new protocols. They'll wait until tonight.

There's a truck stop near the military exit. They pass the gates into Fort Sill and transfer the sleepy soldiers to the Army's care.

Karl turns into the truck stop on the way back, and parks the rig so he can see it from the window. "I'll buy breakfast," he says. He plans to have Carita drive back, knows he'll feel sleepy with food in his belly, trusts that she'll stay awake. She's young, and he isn't.

The menu is handwritten and covered with plastic. Number 19 is crossed through. Karl points to it. "Do you know about that?"

Carita shakes her head. No.

"People ask for crossed-out numbers if they want to buy or sell drugs."

"Do *you?*" she asks.

"No. But you should know. People will ask you because of the uniform, see?" The rig carries enough morphine to get her to L. A. He watches her attack eggs and soy bacon, and wishes he were not an honest man.

Young, talented—even if the music didn't get her out of the system, she could find *something*. It just wasn't fair, for someone so young to face a life of work that grew more and more bitter as the years went by.

Why do I keep working? he asks himself. Why? Sure, there's no place that's better than here, and there isn't much else I could do to keep myself fed, and there's no other way to hang on to my LOC card, but for God's sake, man. What will finally, one day, make me walk away?

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

"No. Good coffee here." Karl lifts the heavy pottery mug as if offering a toast.

And looks down to find he's holding the mug Miller handed him last night. Tires whine on concrete. He feels the ache of bright sun on night-tired eyes. It's not that he's been sleeping, exactly.

Ahead of the rig, he sees an overturned truck. Bales of hay lie scattered across both north-bound lanes. Carita slows. "There's no one here yet," she says.

Carita brakes the rig, and Karl sees the old man before she does, thrown free and slumped against the curve of the barrier.

"Damn," he says. "Set out the hazard markers."

She trots across the highway with orange plastic cones. They make soft hollow thuds as she drops them on the concrete. Loose hay flutters in a south breeze and drifts along the highway.

Deep, gasping breaths, mouth and tongue clear; the broken man is alive. Karl opens his kit and hunkers down. He grabs a cervical collar and braces the man's weathered neck, moves to palpate ribs, abdomen, extremities, while Carita digs in the man's pockets.

The man opens his eyes and squints up at the sun. "Glad you're here."

"How do you feel?"

"I don't hurt. I figure I ought to."

"Squeeze my hand," Karl says. The hand lies flaccid in his. "That's good, good. How long you been out here?"

"Maybe an hour. I can't tell."

Carita pulls out a battered wallet and flips through it. "He's a six," she says.

Spinal injuries don't get regeneration treatment at level six. The old man will lie in an open ward, tubes in his nose, in his penis. He won't last long, Karl hopes.

"My neck's broke," the man says.

"Looks like it," Karl says.

"Put me down, son. Please. You'd do it for a horse."

We don't take life.

Do it, he thinks. *Do* it. Morphine to glaze perceptions, then potassium to stop the heart. Carita may not question what happens. I'll try to let her think it's a natural death. Then I'll send her west with the rest of the morphine; she knows how to sell it.

Put down the burden *now*.

While it still might count for something half-way good.

Coffee-crazy, too tired to think. Oh, hell, why *not* now?

"I'll get some medicine for you," Karl says.

Inside the rig, he unlocks the med box and picks up paired syringes, knows, this time, he's going too far. He never thought he'd kill a patient. But this feels *right*. He senses a certain elation, a feeling of lifted weight. They'll fire him, of course, and take his card. But that's an honest price to pay for hope, even if the hope isn't for *him*, but for Carita, who is young, and needs, at least, hope.

He wonders what he'll say, bringing the rig back with no partner, no drugs. He will have to lie to keep Carita out of trouble, something else he's never done; he'll take the blame for the missing morphine.

She is kneeling beside the old man. She gets up as Karl steps down from the rig. Bright blood smears the white surgical sponge in her hand as she wipes a razor-sharp blade. Her smile is all proud innocence. The old man's throat is slit neatly, from one carotid to the other.

"New protocol," she says. "They told us it might bother some of the senior techs. So I took care of it."

Caffeine and fatigue buzz in Karl's ears. Carita looks puzzled, waits for approval. "Cost effective; see? No disposable equipment."

Had she asked the old man to close his eyes? Or was that not mentioned in the protocol?

After a moment, Karl asks, "What's next?" Surely there's a protocol for this, too. And Carita will have read it.

Carita looks up and down the deserted highway, looks up at the barrier. "He has no close kin," she says. "We can leave him here."

"I see."

Karl does not want her to help him with this task. He does not want to be close enough to her that she might touch him. Not just yet. This is *her* world. There isn't much room for caring in it. In fact, there's no damned room at all. "You'll need to call a wrecker. For the truck," he tells her.

She goes to the rig to make the call.

He picks up the old man's body. It's so light, maybe ninety pounds, easy to lift over the concrete barrier. He lets the body roll down into no-man's land, into dry crackling winter grass.

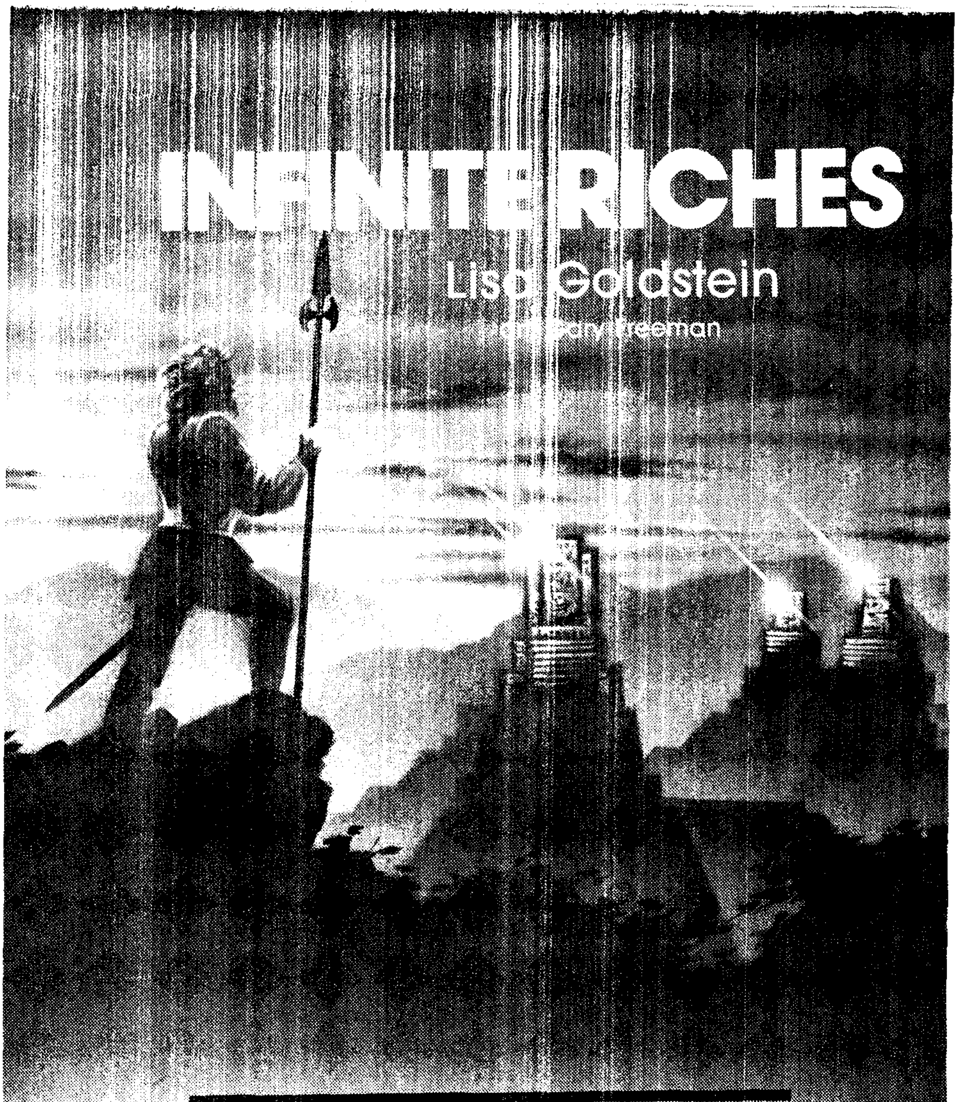
The two of them pull away in the empty rig.

An eagle rides the south wind above the old man's body, and waits for the tell-tale small motions of those who will come to feed. ●

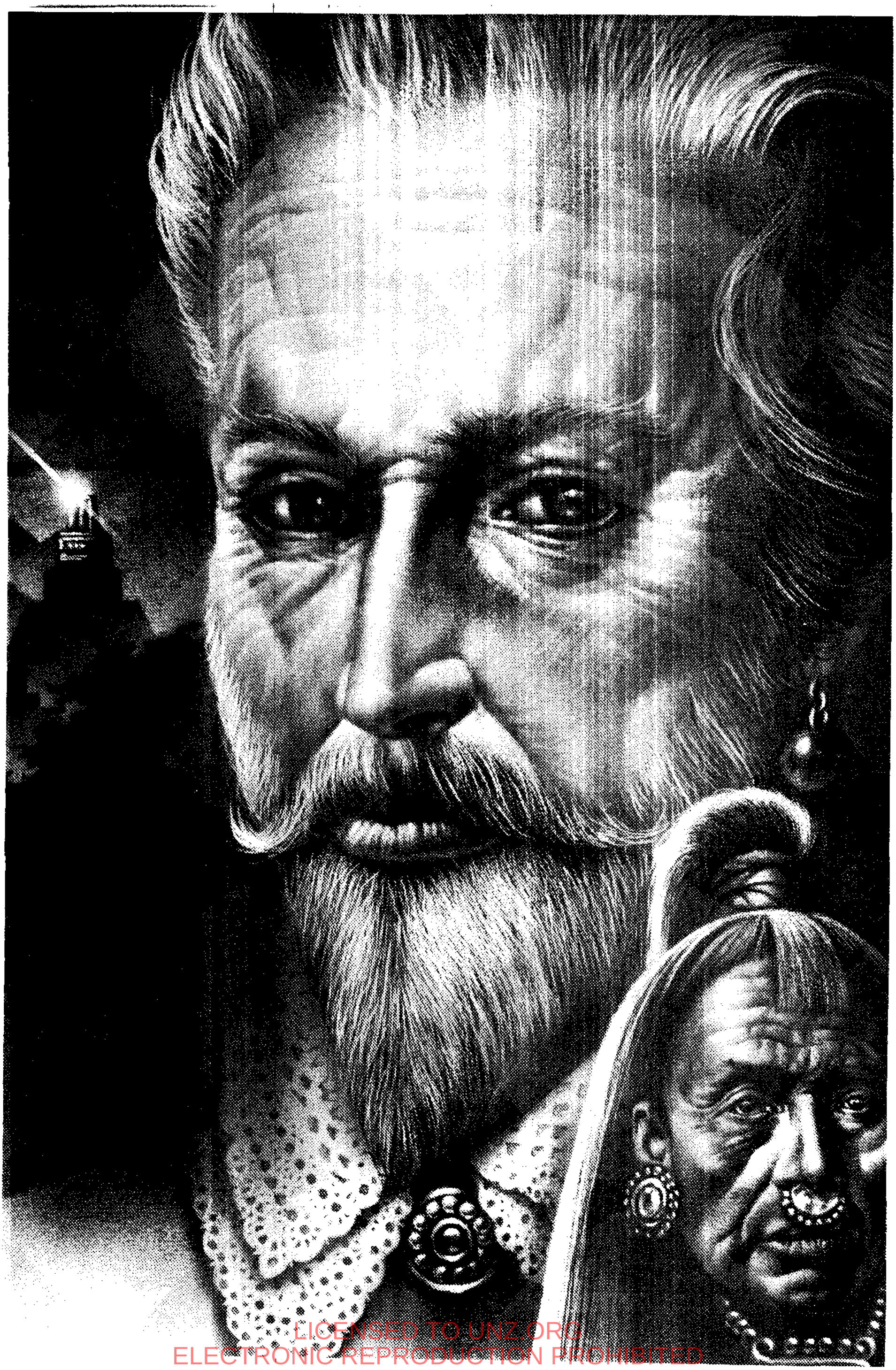
INFINITE RICHES

Lisa Goldstein

art: Gary Freeman



Tor books has just released the first hardcover edition of Lisa Goldstein's American Book Award-winning novel, *The Red Magician.* Tor has also just brought out her new historical fantasy, *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon*, which is set during the Elizabethan era. "Infinite Riches" grew out of the research she did for that novel, but takes place twenty-five years later. The exotic people and perils encountered in this tale are worthy of any of Sir Walter Raleigh's known adventures.



He heard the key turn in the lock: after so many years he could pick out that sound from a hundred other noises. He looked up from his books, heard the muffled conversation and laughter outside his cell. Then, suddenly, his small room filled with men.

There seemed to be hundreds of them; he was not used to seeing so many people at once. He had to blink to allow his vision to accommodate them all.

"Sir Walter," one of them said. He spoke a little scornfully, as if Raleigh's knighthood no longer meant anything.

"Aye?" Walter said.

"The king is considering granting you a pardon."

"Is he?" Walter heard the dry, sardonic tone in his words, but he could not bring himself to beg, not even now.

"Aye. He wants to know the location of El Dorado."

"Ah," he said, not allowing his expression to change. He had heard rumors of King James's financial problems and had seen immediately how he could use those problems to his advantage. He had written several people, bribed several more. His heart beat faster. Could it be that after twelve years he would finally be allowed his freedom?

Now he noticed the fine clothes of the men who had come to deal with him, all of them the king's courtiers and favorites. He stood; he topped the tallest by nearly a head. "Aye," he said. "Tell the king I'll find him El Dorado."

They exchanged courtesies and then the finely-dressed men—there were only half a dozen of them, after all—took their leave. He had not recognized any of them: a whole generation had come to power since he had been imprisoned. He wondered how much his lack of knowledge of court life would hurt his cause.

He would have to be cautious now, very cautious. He would have to plan carefully, to call in favors from all the men he had helped over the years. But he was too excited to sit still. He began to pace his small cell, thinking of the strange history that had brought him to the Tower.

It was true that he had served the old queen, Elizabeth, for so long that the accession of King James had caught him unprepared. And his first meeting with the new king had hardly been propitious: "On my soul, man, I have heard rawly of thee," James had said. He knew then that while he had been mourning his queen his enemies had been busy with the old charges, the accusations of atheism, treason, Machiavellian policy. He was unready, his defenses down. In a very short time he had been sentenced to imprisonment.

They were afraid of him, he understood that. "Damnably proud," they had called him, even before his fall from favor. And all the men from the old reign had died, Leicester and Drake and Essex; he alone had survived into this drab, petty age. It was no wonder James hadn't known what to do with him, that the king had taken the path of cowardice and sent him to prison.

Not that his confinement had been as harsh as some. He had been allowed a small garden, and a shed filled with retorts and copper tubing in which to conduct chemical experiments. He had had leisure enough to begin to write a book called *The History of the World*; if he was not to be freed perhaps he would continue with it and take it beyond the year 168 B.C., where he had left it. Two years after he had come to the Tower of London his friend the Earl of Northumberland had been imprisoned as well, and together they had carried out experiments, talking long into the night. But he would not be sorry to leave—nay, he would not. If the king wanted him to find El Dorado he would be ready. Perhaps his entire life had been spent in preparation for this voyage.

The king's men returned a few days later. He was pacing his cell again when they came; he knew its measurements to within an inch on every side. This time they seemed cautious, unwilling to promise anything. "How can we be certain there is such a place as El Dorado?" one of them said.

"You know that I've visited Guiana once before," he said, and then stopped. Did they, in fact, know anything at all? Gone were the days when his doings furnished gossip for all of London. "In 1595, over twenty years ago. All along the river we heard stories about the city of gold, and its tall golden towers and streets of silver. The little children there use precious stones to play with. And in their ceremonies their chieftain covers himself with oil and his men take hollow canes and blow powdered gold over his body. The Golden One, they call him."

He saw how eagerly the men looked up at the mention of gold. He would have to play variations on that tune, find ways of introducing the subject again and again.

"Why did your expedition turn back?"

"We were hungry and tired, and many of us were sick. We had spent most of our time trying to find our way out of the Orinoco delta. And I expected to be back within the year. Certainly I did not think so much time would have passed before I could return."

He realized he spoke as if the king had already granted him his pardon. Perhaps he should be more circumspect. Nay, why should he be? It was the king who had humbled himself and come to entreat with him; these men were the supplicants, not he.

"Why do you think you'll find El Dorado this time?"

"Because we learned how to navigate the delta. When I return I'll be able to sail directly up the river, toward the city of gold."

"Will you take treasure from the Spaniards?"

He grinned. "Certainly. How else could I raise funds for the expedition?"

"The king forbids it. He wants to make peace with Spain."

Peace with Spain, Elizabeth's old enemy? It was nearly unthinkable. What else had happened at court while he had been imprisoned?

They kept him talking for hours, circling him so that he was never sure who would speak next. Days later they came back with more questions, and they returned often after that. When they left he would review what they had asked, how he had answered. Had he seemed confident, but not so confident that James would have reason to fear him? Could they trust him to remember a voyage he had made over twenty years ago? He tried to find out from them what the king thought, but he could discover nothing.

Then, on a day like every other day, so that he had had no warning, no time to plan, they signaled to the jailer and let him go free.

He sent a messenger to his wife Bess in Sherbourne immediately, telling her about his release. Then, while the king and his men waited anxiously for him to meet with navigators, sailors, shipbuilders, and merchants, he spent days doing nothing but walking the streets of London. The skies that week were overcast, but to him everything seemed too bright, as if he'd stepped out into a summer's day at noon. He had to squint to take it all in. He laughed a little to himself. Why should he hazard his life to travel half a world away? Here in front of him lay El Dorado, the city of gold.

London had changed as if with a wave of a sorcerer's wand. Streets that had been mud when he had gone into the Tower were paved over with cobblestones. New buildings had gone up or been magicked out of recognition; in the Strand his own former house, Durham House, had become part of a two story arcade of shops.

But the hardest thing of all to understand was Westminster Abbey, where Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, Catholic and Protestant, now lay side by side in their carved tombs. How could they have forgotten the half-sisters' enmity in so short a time? Was he the only one who remembered? Could it be that he was unfit to live in this world?

And always, wherever he walked, he saw the walls of his prison cell, hemming in his vision. His heart would pound, and he would have to turn quickly to make sure this was not some evil dream, that he had truly left the Tower. Then the outlines would fade and he would be back in London, a traveler from the fantastic past.

After a few days Bess arrived in London. She had visited him often in the Tower—his son Carew had even been conceived there—but there was a world of difference between seeing her as a prisoner and as a free man. They spent long hours talking over his plans and the voyage ahead. She was worried for him, of course, but she understood that he had no choice. It was only by finding El Dorado that James would grant him his freedom. Neither one said what they both thought, that if he failed he would at best be sent back to the Tower to rot. At the worst he would lose his life.

"Why don't you take the ships and set sail for another country?" she asked him. "You did good service in France—they would certainly remember you there, and treat you well."

"I can't, Bess," he said. "I have a commission from the king." But he wondered if he was telling her the truth, or if it was only his famous pride that kept him from doing as she suggested. He was an old man of sixty-three now, and he felt every one of his years. How could he be certain he would succeed? But nay—he could not let himself think that way.

And then, to the great relief of the king's informer who had been dispatched to follow him, he began finally to ready himself for the voyage. His son Wat, who was to sail with him, came to London from Sherbourne. He met with captains, and saw shipbuilders in Deptford, and arranged for the sale of everything he owned to pay for the fleet. On June 12, 1617, he and his men set sail for Guiana.

His return to Guiana was marked by one disaster after another. Most of his crew became ill on the voyage, and one of the ships went down in a storm; too few of his sailors had remained well enough to man it. And he caught the fever as well; when they reached the island of Trinidad he had to stay behind and recover while his son and others went on.

Two months later they returned with the worst possible news: against all orders the men had attacked the Spanish fort of San Thome. Two had died, one of them his impetuous son Wat.

It seemed to signal the end of all his hopes. He returned to his cabin and stayed there for days, thinking and writing in his journal. How could he break the news about their son to Bess? And what would James say when he returned without the location of El Dorado?

By the third day he came to a decision. He would not think about failure. He had hazarded much on this last great expedition, and he would succeed. Fortune's wheel would turn for him: he would come home in triumph, his ships heavy with the gold they carried. It would be his enemies, all the small-minded men who had gleefully predicted his failure, who would be laid low. He grinned and rubbed his leg, which had stiffened with sitting too long. By God, he would show them something about pride.

He chose men hastily and led them on board a wherry, and they set sail for El Dorado.

The journey down the Orinoco River was uneventful. They passed the Spanish fort and landed near the junction of the Orinoco and Caroni rivers. They then went inland, following the landmarks Walter remembered.

As they walked Walter felt memories of his last voyage come flooding back. The bright birds, colorful as any fashionable court, crimson and purple and green. The strange smell in the air, half rottenness and half the odor of new growth. The grass as short as any parkland, cropped by the deer that walked over it unafraid.

But the plains seemed too vast; the grassland opened out like the sea in front of him. As he walked he saw the walls of his old prison rise up to contain it. He felt a prisoner's fondness for his cell, where he had had everything he needed, books and plants and chemicals. Infinite riches in a little room, he thought, remembering a line from a play by his old friend Christopher Marlowe. But Kit Marlowe was dead now, like too many others.

One of his men, Francis Molyneux, had come up beside him and said something to him. "What?" Walter asked.

"Look, sir," the man said.

He looked. Hundreds of tiny gold pebbles lay on the ground, sparkling in the sun. A few of the men were bending eagerly to pick them up. "Leave them," Walter said. "There'll be far more than this when we get to the mine."

He tilted his head to study the sun, trying to gauge how much longer they would be able to march. Afternoon had come while he had been deep in thought. Gold swam before his eyes.

They walked a few hours more. As the sun set they began to look for a place to make camp. Birds sang. On his last voyage he had seen termites and ants, snakes and the small boars called peccaries, and now he studied the ground carefully, trying to find a place where they would be safe.

"Sweet God," someone said in a high, terrified voice.

He looked up quickly. A group of people were heading for the camp, their shapes indistinct in the fading light. As they came closer he felt his heart turn cold. A premonition, he thought, terrified to his soul. An apparition. A warning of what might happen to me. For the men who approached the camp were headless.

Nay, not headless. He almost laughed with giddiness. Their eyes were in their shoulders, and they had mouths in the middle of their breasts. The Ewaipanoma. He had heard of them on his last expedition and had believed the stories, though some had doubted. He motioned to a man who knew some Spanish. "Hugh," he said, not taking his eyes from the strange beings in front of him. "Come here. I need you to translate."

Hugh moved next to him. "We greet you in the name of James, king of England by grace of God," Walter said.

The men listened gravely to Hugh's translation. One of them began to speak. For a moment Walter could not hear Hugh beside him or anything else, fascinated by the sight of the man's mouth moving in his breast. The two eyes in the shoulders blinked.

He forced himself to pay attention. "They greet you and ask you why you've come," Hugh said.

"Tell them we've come to find the city of gold."

To look at Walter the Ewaipanoma had to turn his entire body. He spoke directly to him, as if he understood that Walter was the leader of the company. "They say they've heard of it, but have never seen it," Hugh said. "They think it's to the east."

"I thank you very much for this information," Walter said. He could not keep his eyes away from the space above the man's shoulders, where he expected to see a head and found only a flat covering of skin. He forced himself to look at the man's chest; the eyes were too far apart to take both of them in at once. "Would you care to take your supper with us?"

Behind him he heard one of the men vomit on the ground. The thought of seeing a man eat through his breast had proved too much for him, probably.

"He says he thanks you, but they will not be able to eat with us," Hugh said. Now Walter saw that some of them carried birds tied to their backs. They were heading back after a hunt, no doubt. He felt disappointed; he would have liked to have learned more about the tribe. Already he was thinking of writing a second part to his book about Guiana; he felt certain it would prove even more popular than the first.

The Ewaipanoma took their leave. The company foraged for food and then stretched out on the ground to sleep. Soon they had all dropped off except Walter. He stared up at the unfamiliar stars, thinking of the mine. They were close indeed, if the Ewaipanoma had heard of the city. Soon he would have all he had worked for: freedom and riches, everything he desired. He watched the fiery stars wheel overhead. Toward dawn he slept.

He woke first and roused his men, and they set off. Though it was still early morning the sun burned fiercely, and midges bit them on every uncovered surface. The pleasant grass gave way to rough outcroppings of granite. A few of the men grumbled as they walked over the rough ground but he barely noticed the discomfort.

Toward noon he saw another company riding toward them. He squinted against the sun, trying to make them out. Spaniards, or more of the Ewaipanoma? The strangers stopped their horses as they approached the company, and he saw the men were Indians, though slightly built. Nay, not men. Women. Amazons.

The women dismounted. One of them spoke. "They ask who it is who rides through their country without leave," Hugh said.

Walter nearly grinned; he knew all about flattering queens. "By your leave, Your Majesty, we did not know that this was your country. We are looking for—"

The queen had apparently heard enough of Hugh's translation. "Who on this earth does not know about the country of women?" she said. "You must be strangers indeed."

"Aye, strangers from a very long way off. From across the ocean. I am Sir Walter Raleigh, knight. I served my queen until she died, and now serve James, king of England by grace of God."

He had hoped to impress her with talk of his queen, but she seemed more puzzled by his speech than anything else. She remained silent for a moment, and he had leisure to observe her and her tribe. They wore the breeches and shirts of men, but they grew their black hair long and braided it behind them. All carried bows nearly as tall as themselves and quivers of arrows. Behind one of the women, mounted on her horse, rode a small child. Some of them wore jewelry fashioned out of green stones and gold, bracelets and pins to tie up their hair. He had heard that they traded with El Dorado, these stones for gold. His eyes moved involuntarily to their breasts.

"Nay, Sir Walter, we do not cut off our breasts," the queen said. "Why should we do such a thing? That is a story men put out about us—we do not know why."

He flushed. The women strode closer to him and he backed away, confused. They were too bold, he thought. In all his life only one woman had acted so, as an equal with men, and she had been a queen.

One of his men laughed lewdly. Walter turned quickly. The man took a step toward the woman nearest him, grinning, but before he could reach her all the women around him had set arrows to their bows.

Francis Molyneux unsheathed his dagger and put it at the throat of the man who had laughed. "Not one step closer," he said. He twisted the man's arm behind him for emphasis.

"Nor will we choose among you for men to lie with," the queen said. She had not dropped her bow, or taken her eyes off the man she aimed at. "We choose only strong men, so that our daughters will be strong."

Angry now, Walter nearly made a retort he would regret later. Why should these foul harridans think he would lie with them? He searched for a neutral reply and finally said, "What do you do with the sons?"

"We send them to their fathers."

"Ah," he said. "My lady, we hope not to inconvenience you further. We are looking for El Dorado, the city of gold, and beg leave to ride through your country."

"Very well," the woman said. She returned the arrow to her quiver and mounted her horse. "Our country extends a half a day's walk in that direction. You must not kill any of our animals for food, or eat from any of our trees, or cut down our trees for your fires. If you do we will know it, and we will hunt you down and kill you."

"Have you seen El Dorado?" he asked.

"We have heard stories, no more."

He didn't believe her. Where had they gotten the gold he saw on their arms and in their hair? If it came to that, though, he didn't believe the Ewaipanoma either. No one could live so close to the city of gold and remain in ignorance of it. But he bowed courteously and led his men away.

His spirits began to rise soon after they left the Amazons, and he strode quickly over the stony ground. Sun glittered over the chips of gold. The men behind him panted as they walked and he grinned harshly; he was twice as old they were and could still outpace any of them.

He looked back at the company and laughed. Aye, the Amazons had done well to refuse this sorry crew. And why had he thought they would want him, old and gray and nearly lame? Bess, he thought, you never had worse cause to fear for my loyalty.

Francis Molyneux pushed ahead of the rest of the company and walked beside him. He frowned. Something about the man's behavior with the Amazons had been wrong; he had acted just a moment too late, after the women had already aimed their bows. Or had he thought the Amazons would not be able to defend themselves?

"Nearly there, sir," Francis said. "Have you noticed the way the ground shines with the stones?"

"Aye," Walter said. Nay, why should he suspect this man, the only one who had acted while the others had stood like sheep? Only Francis seemed to understand what this voyage meant to him, only Francis had shown excitement at the prospect of discovering El Dorado. The others were merely interested in the gold; he had seen them collecting pebbles when they thought his attention was elsewhere.

"What will you do with the riches you find?" Francis asked.

"The riches belong to the king, of course. If we are strong enough we will take El Dorado in his name. If not I will return later with an army, if the king grants me leave."

"But surely the king will allow you to keep some of the gold."

"I hope so, Francis. And you hope the same for yourself, I'm sure."

Francis fell silent. Walter saw that he had embarrassed him in some way. But why else had he come, if not for riches? Perhaps he had come for the thrill of discovery. Perhaps Walter had misjudged the man.

He looked ahead to the granite plains before him. The walls of his prison returned to hem him in, but by an effort of will he forced them outward, widened them to take in more of the plain. No man in history, he thought, had gone so quickly from such a little room to such infinite riches.

The sun began to set. The men complained of hunger but he forbade them to eat anything; he had no doubt that the Amazons would do as they had threatened. He looked to the west and saw a shining path stretching back the way he had come: the sun illuminating the gold on the ground.

The sky grew darker. Now the men wanted to stop for the night, but he pushed them onward, anxious to reach his goal. In a few moments he was rewarded. He topped a rise and in front of him, lit by the last rays of the setting sun, he saw the golden towers of El Dorado.

The men came up behind him and stood without speaking. The city shone like a beacon. At the feet of the proud towers lay the lake he had heard of, Manoa. In the glow of the setting sun the lake seemed on fire.

The men needed no encouragement now to press on. They came to the lake and found boats lying at the docks, as if they were expected. Did these people fear no one, then? The city would be easier to take than he had thought: he could do it with the few men he had.

The company divided into two parts and rowed toward the towers. Francis had followed him onto his boat. Suddenly he understood Francis's behavior: the boy worshiped him as a hero. He had seen this from men he had commanded before, but it had been so long ago he had forgotten.

The boats rowed smoothly toward the towers. In the sky the sun began to set, taking the color from the lake. He heard no sound but the creak and splash of oars.

Docks waited for them on the other side too. Walter disembarked first. He stood and rubbed his bad leg, which had stiffened in the chill from the water. Then he said, "I claim this, the city of El Dorado, in the name of James, king of England by grace of God."

Someone placed cold steel at his throat. He tried to turn but the man held him deftly. "Did you think the king would allow you to get this far?" Francis said. His breath was hot in Walter's ear. "He knows your plans, how you would set yourself up as king of El Dorado and return with your wealth to challenge his throne."

"I—" Walter said.

"Do not speak, traitor. He cautioned me against your honeyed words, told me you could make a man swear black was white if it suited your purposes. He said I was to thank you for your services, and then make certain you died once we reached El Dorado."

Walter twisted but could not get away. Francis was in his twenties, young and strong. Walter had only his cunning to get himself free, and it had not served him well so far.

The company stood by the boats, unmoving. He had chosen them poorly indeed: these men were the scum of the earth. Then, to his great surprise, he felt the arm holding the dagger grow lax. Francis slumped to the ground.

He turned and saw a man as tall as himself move softly out of the shadows. The man held a blow-tube of the kind he had seen before among the native tribes. "Welcome to El Dorado, Sir Walter Raleigh," he said in perfect English. "We were expecting you. Do not be alarmed—he is not dead. Come—we have planned a great feast."

Moving as if in a dream, he followed the man away from the lake. Other men came out of the shadows, lifted Francis and carried him away. Behind him he could hear his company arguing fiercely among themselves but he did not look back; he could not bring himself to care if they came or stayed. Finally the arguments stopped and he heard them follow.

The sand surrounding the lake gave way to grass. The tall man—the chief, Walter supposed—led them onto a small winding path. Trees grew on both sides of them. Night had fallen and he could see very little, but he smelled lemon and some kind of perfumed flower. The air around them was still warm.

The path broadened, became smoother. He wondered if it was paved with silver or gold, as in the stories. Certainly it felt more level than the London streets he knew.

Towers rose up above them: in the night he felt their bulk rather than saw them. Light spilled from windows directly in front of him. The chief led them inside.

They passed through several rooms. Fires burned in the hearths, and by their lights he could see intricate tapestries, vases of colored glass, golden figurines. Men and women passing through looked up from their tasks and nodded to his group graciously. Finally they came to a room which held nothing but benches and a long table. Each of his men was led to a place set with silver plates and goblets of fragile colored glass. He heard the men murmuring among themselves, exclaiming softly over the finery.

Six men and women brought out a huge platter, nearly staggering under the weight of it. "The peccary—you would call it a small boar," the chief said, sitting beside Walter. "I hope you enjoy it."

He did. They hadn't eaten anything in the Amazons' territory, and he saw his men fall on the food as if they had been starving for weeks. More courses appeared after the peccary: fish and birds and fruit, each more delicious than the last. Servants came and poured wine in the goblets, filling each glass before it became empty.

The men grew quiet, sated. Even the wine failed to rouse them. For the first time Walter considered poison, and cursed himself for a fool. These people had proven they knew how to manufacture sleeping draughts. What had been in the potion that had felled Francis Molyneux?

Walter turned and studied the chief carefully. He was an old man, but time had sharpened rather than dulled his features, so that his face looked carved out of stone. He wore a long flowing skirt and nothing else; the skin of his chest and arms and face seemed to glow with rich health. Was that how the rumors of the Golden One had started?

"Are you enjoying our hospitality, Sir Walter?"

"I don't know," Walter said. "The food, at least, is excellent. But does your hospitality extend to answering a few questions?"

The chief laughed. "Of course."

"Well, then, how do you know my name? What did you mean when you said that you were expecting me? Are you the chief of these people?"

"I am the king, yes. My name is Tuala. I—"

"Where is Francis? What have you done with the rest of my men?"

"I'll explain everything, I promise you. But first I have to tell you a story. Will you listen?"

Walter nodded grudgingly.

"We are an old people," Tuala said. "Many, many years ago we traveled the world and saw strange sights, as strange as anything you have seen here. After we had mapped the globe we realized that nowhere in the world had we come across anything as fair as the country you see around you. We had found nothing so fertile, so rich, so pleasant. And so we made the decision, which some have criticized, to turn inward, to contemplate philosophy. We have not gone traveling in a very long time."

Walter stirred impatiently. His bad leg hurt from the walking he had done that day.

"One of the places we saw on our journeys was London," Tuala said. "But it was a London you would not recognize, a collection of huts by the river. Many years later we heard rumors of you, Sir Walter, and of the inquiries you made about us, and we remembered the tiny village on the banks of the Thames. We were amazed that you had come so far in so short a time."

Was he being patronized? Angrily he said, "I don't see what—"

The chief continued as though Walter had said nothing. His voice was low, sonorous, and he spoke English well, though with a slight musical accent. "We knew then that nothing would stop your people, the English, that you would not rest until you found us. And we felt certain that it would be you, Sir Walter, who would return and make the discovery. We were only surprised that it took you so long to do it."

He seemed to be waiting for an answer. "I was in prison," Walter said. "For twelve years."

A look of disgust passed over the chief's face. "Ah," he said. For a moment it seemed he could not go on. He gazed at Walter with something like pity. "Well," he said, "we planned for your return. We learned all we could about your people. We found a Spaniard who would teach us English."

That was the slight accent he heard, then—not the chief's own language but Spanish. "Did you wonder, Sir Walter," Tuala said, "why it was so easy for you to find us? Why the Spanish, who have been here for decades, have never conquered us?"

Suddenly Walter understood. It had been a trap—they would kill him here. They had already killed Francis, probably, and poisoned his other men. He had been a fool, he had allowed these men to gull him with their fine food and wine. He rose from the bench. "What—"

"Sit, Sir Walter, please. We have done nothing to your men, you have my word on that. Would you be surprised if I told you that many people have found us, that we have played host to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Spaniards?"

"No more riddles, please. Tell me what you plan to do with me."

"You are our guest—tell me first what you planned to do with us."

"We wanted to—to trade with you."

"Nay, it does not become you to lie. I have been honest with you in all things so far, and I hope you will do the same for me. We heard you claim our city for your king."

"Very well. We intended to conquer you." It sounded foolish, a child's boast. "We did not understand—I did not know what you were like. We thought you were barbarians."

"Ah. So you have given over your plans of conquest?"

Walter nodded.

"Can I believe that? It was just a moment before that you lied to me. Or should I believe that you will return to your King James and lead his army to our city?"

Walter said nothing. He could not lie to this man—he knew that now. But the chief did not know about the bargain he had made with James. He could not return without the location of the mine.

"You see that we cannot allow you to leave," Tuala said.

"Ah. And so I am to be your prisoner."

The chief's look of distaste returned. "We do not like to imprison people. There is another way. We can make you forget everything you have seen here. You will leave without ever knowing you have discovered the city *you sought.*"

"Nay—"

"Aye. How else do you think we have kept our location a secret for so long? We made the Spaniard who taught us English forget. And the Amazons we trade with, and the Ewaipanoma."

"And if I refuse to forget?"

"Then, my friend, we will have to keep you here."

Walter looked up in surprise. He had guessed from Tuala's reaction to his talk of prison that the chief would not hold anyone against his will.

"Oh, yes, Sir Walter. But we will not put you in prison. You'll be allowed to go anywhere you like, anywhere but back to your country and King James. And who knows? Perhaps you'll come to like it here."

Walter said nothing. "We will give you leisure to think," the chief said.

"To think! How am I to think—what am I to think in this place? Everything I thought I knew has proven false. How do I know I didn't meet you twenty years ago, on my first voyage?"

The chief laughed. "Nay, we did not meet. I have looked forward to this moment for a long time. You have proven yourself every bit as clever as I had heard."

Walter rubbed his forehead. "I don't feel very clever. And I don't like the idea of you doing something to my memories. I have nothing in the world, nothing. I sold everything I owned to raise the money for this voyage. My mind and what is in it are all I have left."

"We have no choice. We must have you return to King James and tell him—tell him honestly—that there is no such land as El Dorado."

And lose my head, Walter thought. What would this man say if he knew *all* that is at stake here?

"Think about what I have said," the chief said. "You are free to explore any part of the city, but you will not be allowed to go beyond our borders."

Music began to play in another room. "You are tired, Sir Walter," Tuala said. "You and your men must rest. We will talk later."

He fought against sleepiness. What had been in the wine? Would all his long journey end here, sometime in the night, as he finally succumbed to slow-acting poison?

Servants came to lead them to their rooms. He tried to hold to coherent thought, to ask an intelligent question. He must have said something, because he heard a servant laugh. Then, somehow, he was in the bed, drifting off to sleep.

He awoke feeling refreshed, clear-headed. The servants had provided him with a wash-basin, and he cleaned himself as best he could. When he was done he saw that clothes had been set out on a chest at the foot of the bed. He dressed himself slowly, marveling at the textures of the doublet and hose. And how did they know the kinds of clothes he was accustomed to wear? The men here wore—what did they wear? He couldn't remember. Had it all been a dream?

He went outside. Tuala had given him the liberty of the city, and he decided to take the other man at his word. He strode the lawns with their riotous profusion of flowers, so different from a formal English garden. He walked by the canals that fed the lake, looking with interest at the boats drawn by horses on the towpath. He moved through the golden streets and saw children using markers of precious gems—ruby, sapphire, emerald—in their games.

He entered the towers with their banners of silver and green, red and gold, and came finally to a library crowded with ancient volumes. Tuala and a younger man stood by a table weighted down with scrolls. They spoke in low, urgent voices. The younger man seemed to be arguing, demanding something from the chief. They had not yet noticed Walter.

Finally Walter heard his name. What were they saying? But the two men had seen him, and the chief broke off to come over and greet him. The other man moved toward the door. Before he left he gave Walter a look that seemed heavy with malice.

"Did I interrupt something?" Walter asked.

"We were discussing matters of state, nothing more," the chief said smoothly. "It is not your concern."

It was his concern, though; he had heard his name. That day and in the days that followed he continued his explorations, walking with a tireless intensity. He chose a different direction each time, hoping to make Tuala think his walks were aimless. But he had a purpose, a method. He wanted to find the mine, or, failing that, the storehouse where the gold was kept.

And what then? Could he escape and return to England? He would have to cross the country of women, and the Amazons seemed to be allied in some way with Tuala's people. And then he would have to pass by the Spanish fort, and somehow sail alone down the Orinoco, because he couldn't trust the men he had brought with him. But these things seemed unimportant in the face of his urgency. All that mattered was finding the mine.

One day he followed a road and found himself, to his surprise, in an English countryside. Men were hurrying to bring in the crops before the rainy season, which in this upside-down country started in April. Beyond the fields he saw a low weathered building. It looked out of place, and he realized with surprise that it was the first structure he had seen that reminded him of England. A barn, probably, he thought, but his heart beat faster as he approached it.

The door opened to his touch. Surely they would not be so foolish as to keep their gold here, unprotected. But a shaft of light came through the cracks in the walls, and it illuminated all the riches he had sought, gold and silver and precious gems. He could not help reaching out his hand to touch, to hold. A sane part of his mind whispered, Are we turning thief, then? but he ignored it.

Someone shouted. He turned, dropping the emerald he had taken. The man he had seen arguing with the chief stood behind him in the strange cathedral light, speaking angrily and moving toward him. Walter raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. Did they all understand English, or only Tuala? "I was exploring, nothing more," Walter said, backing away carefully.

The man made a fist. Walter tried to block him but it was too late—the blow hit his face, cutting his lip. The man made as if to strike again, but this time Walter was ready, landing his own blow on the man's stomach. The other man doubled over with a cry of pain and rage.

Walter grinned. Age had not slowed him down, then—it had only made him more cunning, more capable of finding another man's weaknesses. The young whelp remained bent over, more stunned than hurt, probably. Finally he stood and said through clenched teeth, "The king will be told about this."

"Certainly. I'll tell him myself. What will he say about an unprovoked attack on one of his guests?"

"Unprovoked! I caught you in the middle of committing a crime. He'll put you on trial."

"What crime?"

"We don't have a word for it," the man said. "But in your language I think it's called theft."

"Is it true you were in the storehouse?" the chief asked Walter. The man who had attacked him stood at the chief's side, smiling maliciously.

"Aye. You said I could walk wherever I pleased."

"And is it true you stole an emerald?"

"Nay. I stole nothing."

"Only because I stopped you," the other man said. "He had the emerald in his hand—I saw it."

The chief sighed. "Nuad thinks we cannot trust you. He thinks you've come to rob us."

Walter said nothing.

"He says our only choice is to kill you now."

"Nay, tell him all of it," Nuad said angrily. "Kill him, aye—but that will solve the problem for only a little while. We must strike at the root."

"Do you understand, Sir Walter?" Tuala said.

"We'll attack England," Nuad said. "We made a mistake all those years ago, when we decided to turn inward. We must wake up and look around us, see what is happening in the world. Sooner or later your people will come to destroy us. We must destroy them before that happens."

For the first time Walter thought the chief looked tired, defeated. "Do you understand?" Tuala said again. Walter nodded—he had seen struggles for power before. "You did not arrive at the best of times for us. Somehow we must resolve this question before you return home."

"Resolve the question?" the young man said scornfully. "Kill him now!"

"Nay!" Tuala said. For the moment the chief seemed to grow, to gain stature.

"Then put him on trial."

"For what? We have no laws against theft in this country. The children come to the storehouse to take gems for their games."

"But this man is not a child," Nuad said, becoming angrier as he saw the chief about to decide against him. "He is not one of us. Sooner or later he will lead his king to our mine."

"Will he?" Tuala said.

"Of course he will! Or do you place all your hopes in this man's honor? I tell you he has none!"

The chief said nothing. Nuad took it as a dismissal. "Remember my words," he said as he left. "He'll return with an army at his back."

That evening after dinner Tuala escorted them to a room filled with musicians and dancers. To Walter's surprise the chief took to the floor and danced a wild and complex measure with a young woman. "Come, Sir Walter, join us," Tuala said when the dance had ended.

His leg was bad that night—he should not have walked so long and so hard. "Nay, I thank you," he said. Some of his company, he saw, were choosing up partners for the next dance.

"Then we will talk awhile," the chief said.

He sat easily, not even winded from the dance. In the candles on the table the golden glow of his skin was very pronounced. How old was Tuala? He had spoken of the huts of London as if he had seen them personally. For a heart-stopping moment, a moment in which it seemed as if he hung, dizzyingly, over a precipice, Walter wondered if these folk were immortal. "How old are you?" Walter said.

Tuala smiled. "Nearly a hundred."

Not immortal then, Walter thought, feeling both relieved and disappointed. "Tell me about your king," the chief said.

Walter shrugged. "I barely know him. I served Elizabeth, who was queen before him."

"Ah. And what was she like?"

"Wise and beautiful, virtuous and kind," he said. He put aside his memories of her last days, her back gone crooked and her teeth rotted to blackness in her mouth. A lady whom time had surprised, he had called her once.

"And James? Is he wise as well?"

"I don't know."

"Was it he who sent you to prison?"

Walter nodded.

"Then he cannot be so very wise, I think."

"Nay, he is a coward." The words burst from him before he was aware of them. "He wears a thick padded jerkin, summer and winter, because he fears the assassin's knife. He sent a man to spy on me, a coward like himself, who would only fight when he saw the odds were on his side, or when he could attack from behind."

"Then why do you serve him?"

"Because he is king. Because God appointed him king."

Tuala said nothing. Walter thought over what he had said, wondering how it would appear to this strange man before him. It was true that he would have preferred to serve Elizabeth to the end of his days. Like a feudal serf he gave his loyalty to few, and always to a person rather than an institution. James had never earned his trust; perhaps that was why he had been sent to the Tower.

"The dances are ending," the chief said. "We had best go to bed."

That night Walter dreamed of Wat. He had hardly thought of his son in the past few days, had put out of his mind the letter he would have to write to Bess. Yet when he woke he thought he saw the boy standing in front of him, like an avenging ghost in a play.

Wat was dead, and the other man who had been shot by the Spanish—sweet God, he didn't even know his name! By what right did he think he could command men to do as he ordered, to send them even to their deaths? God had not appointed him king. He had been driven only by personal ambition and his hope for gain.

Nay, it was worse than that. Nuad had been right—he was nothing but a common thief, a man without honor. What was the difference, after all, between robbing a man and plundering a country? The latter had been sanctioned by a king, true, but what was the word of James worth?

He stayed in his room the next day, thinking and writing in his journal. Toward evening he went out and walked through the gardens to the plains beyond. He must not have come to the borders of the chief's country, because no one made as if to stop him. He had the sense he was being watched.

The walls of his cell widened outward to take in the entire plain. Then it seemed as if they widened still further, that his mind grew to encompass all he had learned in the past few weeks. He thought of the Ewaipanoma, and the Amazons, and the folk of El Dorado.

He turned and went in search of the chief.

"I have another plan," Walter said to Tuala. "I do not choose to forget the beauties of your country. But I won't stay in any prison, no matter how fair. I'll go back to King James and say of my own free will that I have not found El Dorado."

"And what will the king do then? What happens when you return without the treasure you promised him?"

"I don't know."

"I daresay you have some idea. We have spoken to some of your men—they tell us you will be killed if you return without the location of the mine."

So the old chief knew that as well. Was there nothing of his life hidden from this man?

"Can we trust you to keep our secret in the face of death?" the chief asked.

Walter nodded slowly. "I promise you I will do it. You have my word on it."

"You surprise me. And yet I find I believe you. But if that's true then we can't allow you to go back—we won't have your death on our hands. Stay here, Sir Walter. You'll find that your prison will be very fair indeed. We'll give you the liberty of our city—you'll study the old books with us and learn our philosophy."

"Nay—I've had enough of prisons. And what of my wife? What will she think when I don't return?"

"What good can you do her under a sentence of death?"

"Very well, then, what will happen to you? Someone will guess where I am and come after me. What will you do then?"

"We cannot keep our city a secret much longer. The world is opening up to travelers and explorers—sooner or later we will be discovered. Already stories about us are spreading throughout the land. We need another hundred years or so, and then we will be ready."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when this plain is finally explored there will be no trace of us left. We will have gone away, into the heart of the jungle. People will think the stories of El Dorado a myth, nothing more."

"Then let me grant you the time you need. Let me tell the king there is no El Dorado."

The chief sighed. "I'll have to think about it. But I will tell you this, Sir Walter—you have more courage than any man I have ever met. Your king was a fool to keep you imprisoned."

"Aye, he was," Walter said, and grinned. Somehow he had transferred his loyalty to this chief who sat before him. Nay, not a chief—he had wanted to be called king. And why not? He had earned the title, unlike James.

One of Tuala's men led Walter through the main tower to a room he had never seen before. Something Tuala had said made Walter think the man might be some sort of surgeon, but one who practiced a medicine unlike any Walter had ever known. The surgeon stopped at a doorway and took out a key. Walter looked on in surprise—he had not seen any locked rooms since he had come to El Dorado, not even his own.

The surgeon opened the door. Francis lay on a bed inside. He sat up when the surgeon came in and began to speak angrily. "Why am I imprisoned here? When am I to be released?" His eyes widened when he saw Walter, and he had the grace to look afraid.

"I would not have killed you," Francis said quickly. "I was to make certain you claimed El Dorado for King James, nothing more."

"Of course," Walter said evenly. Did the man's treachery have no end? Was this fool typical of the men James liked to have around him? Elizabeth would have taken Francis's measure in minutes, and then dismissed him forever.

The surgeon gave Francis food and drink, and the man ate and drank hungrily. "You'll get me out, won't you, Sir Walter? When the king finds out how I've been treated he won't be pleased. He'll return with an army, won't he, sir? Tell this fool what the king will do to him."

His words grew slower, disjointed. Finally he lay back on the bed, his eyes unfocused. "I put the potion in his drink," the surgeon said. "Watch."

Fascinated, Walter listened as the surgeon described a journey Francis had never taken. The surgeon led Francis over the plains and beyond, to the forests and highlands of the lower Orinoco. Francis nodded in agreement, his eyes glazed. "When you return to your ship you will remember nothing of this city," the surgeon said. "You will be able to tell your king you could not find us. El Dorado is a pretty story, nothing more."

Francis nodded. "A pretty story," he said, and slept.

Three months later, at dawn, King James's men led Sir Walter from the Gatehouse to the scaffold at Westminster Hall. Someone kindly gave him a cup of sack and asked him how he liked it. "It's a good drink," Walter said, "if a man might tarry at it," and was pleased to see that the old jest still had the power to make men laugh.

He felt very nearly content. The fever that had infected him on the way to Guiana had returned, and his limp was worse than ever. He was an old man, his life over. Yet he had one more act to play out, one final secret to carry to the grave.

All during the voyage home, while around him his men slowly forgot the gardens and golden towers, while they spoke of a voyage that had never happened, a dream-voyage, he had torn out pages from his journal and substituted another story. Anyone who found his journal would think that he had never left Trinidad. He wrote a letter to Bess and thought about Wat, his impetuous son who had been so much like him. His life was over. He had lost, and won. He had found quite another sort of riches.

In the dawn air he shook from cold and from his fever. He hoped that the crowd would not take his shivering for fear. For there was a crowd, and a large one, although King James had scheduled the execution on the same day as the Lord Mayor's pageants and shows. It was important that all of London talk about his execution, and that there be no mention of the gold mine he had gone to find. His death would buy King Tuala and his people the hundred years they needed.

He mounted the scaffold and looked out over the crowd. In spite of himself he felt gratified that so many people had come to see him, all his old friends and enemies, even folk who knew him only as a legend. "I thank God that He has sent me to die in the sight of so honorable an assembly and not in the darkness," he said.

His listeners expected to hear a defense against the charges of treason and atheism brought against him, and so he spoke a little more. He saw their upturned faces, listening raptly. Aye, he had not lost the ability to move a crowd. London would talk about nothing else for a very long time to come.

Finally he laid himself down on the block. The executioner hesitated, and he heard someone say into the silence, "We have not another such head to be cut off." He closed his eyes and saw before him the high towers of El Dorado, and then the shadow of the axe. Then he saw and heard nothing more. ●

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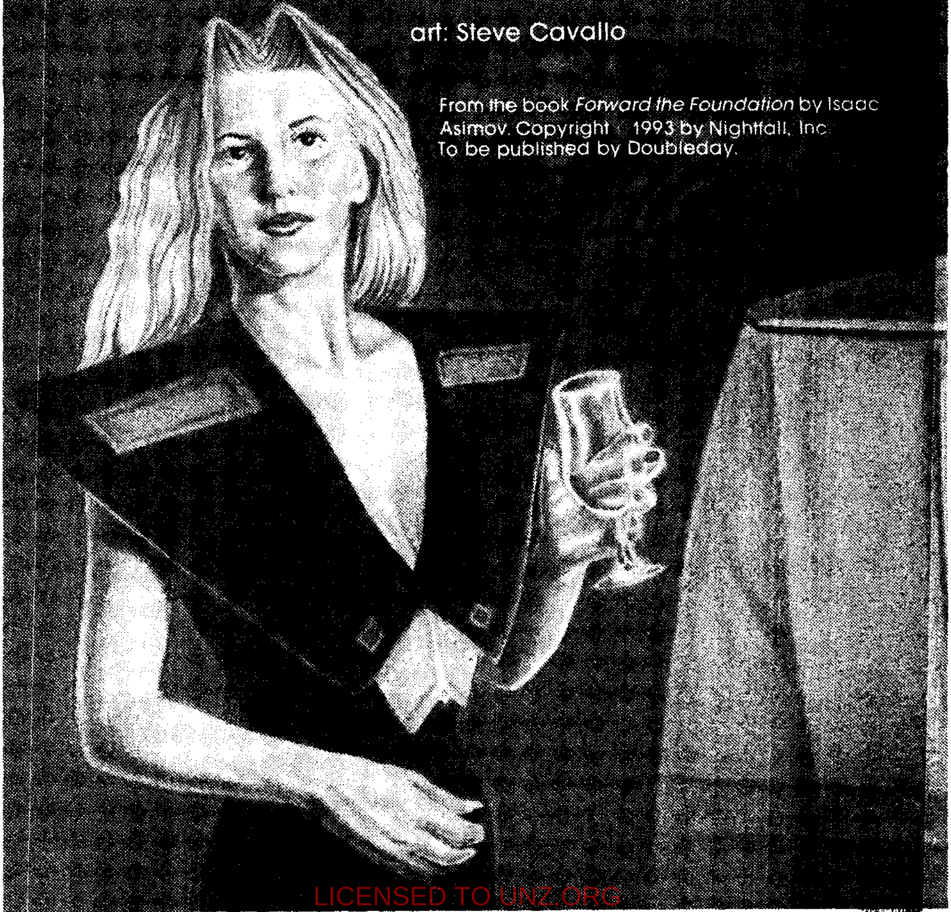
THE CONSORT

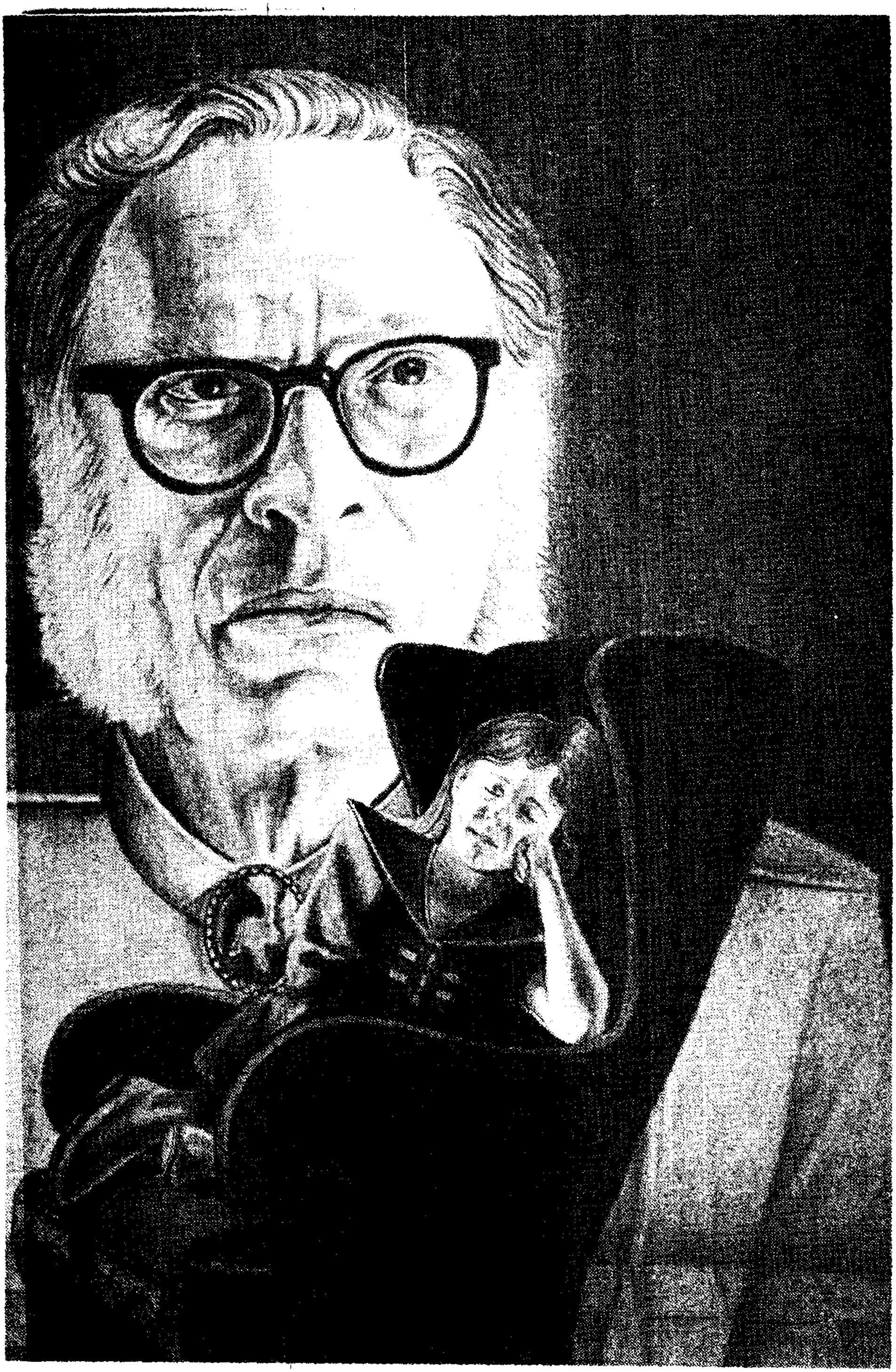
Isaac Asimov

With the publication of "Foundation" in its May 1942 issue, *Astounding Science-Fiction* made history. This tale was the first in a series of stories that were published in that magazine. They would eventually make up the world-famous Foundation Trilogy. We proudly, although sadly, bring this era to a close with the last original magazine publication of a Foundation story. "The Consort" is riveting and poignant. It and two other tales, "Forward the Foundation" (November 1991) and "Cleon the Emperor" (April 1992), form part of *Forward the Foundation*, the last Foundation novel. This book will be out soon from Doubleday.

art: Steve Cavallo



From the book *Forward the Foundation* by Isaac Asimov. Copyright © 1993 by Nightfall, Inc. To be published by Doubleday.



VENABILI, DORS—The life of Hari Seldon is well encrusted with legend and uncertainty, so that little hope remains of ever obtaining a biography that can be thoroughly factual. Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of his life deals with his consort, Dors Venabili. There is no information concerning her whatever prior to her arrival at Streeling University to become a member of the history faculty. It was shortly after that that she met Seldon and remained his consort for twenty-eight years. If anything, her life is more interlarded with legend than Seldon's is. There are quite unbelievable tales of her strength and speed and she was widely spoken of, or perhaps whispered of, as "The Tiger Woman." Still more puzzling than her coming, however, is her going, for after a certain time, we hear of her no more, and there is no indication as to what happened.

Her role as a historian is evidenced by her works on—

Encyclopedia Galactica

1.

Wanda was almost eight years old now, going by Galactic Standard Time—as everyone did. She was quite the little lady; grave, and with straight light-brown hair. Her eyes were blue but were darkening and she might well end with the brown eyes of her father.

She sat there, lost in thought. —Sixty.

That was the number that preoccupied her. Grandfather was going to have a birthday and it was going to be his sixtieth, and sixty was a large number. It bothered her because yesterday she had had a bad dream about it.

She went in search of her mother. She would have to ask.

Her mother was not hard to find. She was talking to Grandfather—about the birthday, surely. Wanda hesitated. It wouldn't be nice to ask in front of Grandfather.

Her mother had no trouble whatever sensing Wanda's consternation. She said, "One minute, Hari, and let's see what's bothering Wanda. What is it, dear?"

Wanda pulled at her hand. "Not here, Mother. Private."

Manella turned to Hari Seldon. "See how early it starts. Private lives. Private problems. Of course, Wanda, shall we go to your room?"

"Yes, Mother." Wanda was clearly relieved.

Hand in hand, they went, and then her mother said, "Now what is the problem, Wanda?"

"It's Grandfather, Mother."

"Grandfather! I can't imagine him doing anything to bother you."

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"Well, he is." Wanda's eyes filled with sudden tears. "Is he going to die?"

"Your grandfather? What put that into your head, Wanda?"

"He's going to be sixty. That's so old."

"No, it isn't. It's not young, but it's not old, either. People live to be eighty, ninety, even a hundred, and your grandfather is strong and healthy. He'll live a long time."

"Are you sure?" She was sniffing.

Manella grasped her daughter by the shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. "We must all die someday, Wanda. I've explained that to you before. Just the same, we don't worry about it till the someday is much closer." She wiped Wanda's eyes gently. "Grandfather is going to stay alive till you're all grown up and have babies of your own. You'll see. Now come back with me. I want you to talk to Grandfather."

Wanda sniffed again.

Seldon looked at the little girl with a sym[illegible]tic expression on her return, and said, "What is it, Wanda? Why [illegible] unhappy?"

Wanda shook her head.

Seldon turned his gaze to the girl's mother. "Well, what is it, Manella?"

Manella shook her head. "She'll have to tell you herself."

Seldon sat down and tapped his lap. "Come, Wanda. Take your seat and tell me your troubles."

She obeyed and wriggled a bit, then said, "I'm scared."

Seldon put his arm about her. "Nothing to be scared of in your old grandfather."

Manella made a face. "Wrong word."

Seldon looked up at her. "Grandfather?"

"No. Old."

That seemed to break the dike. Wanda burst into tears. "You're old, Grandfather."

"I suppose so. I'm sixty." He bent his face down to Wanda's and whispered. "I don't like it either, Wanda. That's why I'm glad you're only seven going on eight."

"Your hair is white, Grandpa."

"It wasn't always. It's just gotten to be."

"White hair means you're going to die, Grandpa."

Seldon looked shocked. He said to Manella, "What is all this?"

"I don't know, Hari. It's her own idea."

"I had a bad dream," said Wanda.

Seldon cleared his throat. "We all have bad dreams, now and then, Wanda. It's good we do. Bad dreams get rid of bad thoughts, and then we're better off."

"It was about you dying, Grandfather."

"I know. I know. Dreams can be about dying, but that doesn't make them important. Look at me. Don't you see how alive I am—and cheerful—and laughing? Do I look as though I'm dying? Tell me."

"N—no."

"There you are then. Now you go out and play and forget all about this. I'm just having a birthday and everyone will have a good time. Go ahead, dear."

Wanda left, in reasonable cheer, but Seldon motioned to Manella to stay.

2.

Seldon said, "Wherever do you think Wanda got such a notion?"

"Come now, Hari. She had a Salivanian gecko that died, remember? One of her friends had a father who died in an accident, and she sees deaths on holovision all the time. It is impossible for any child to be so protected as not to be aware of death. Actually I wouldn't want her to be so protected. Death is an essential part of life; she must learn that."

"I don't mean death in general, Manella. I mean my death in particular. What has put that into her head?"

Manella hesitated. She was very fond indeed of Hari Seldon—and, she thought, who would not be—so how could she say this?

But how could she not say this? So she said, "Hari, you yourself put it into her head."

"I?"

"Of course, you've been speaking for months of turning sixty and complaining loudly of growing old. The only reason people are setting up this party is to console you."

"It's no fun turning sixty," said Seldon, indignantly. "Wait! Wait! You'll find out."

"I will, if I'm lucky. Some people don't make it to sixty. Just the same, if turning sixty and being old are all you talk about, you end up frightening an impressionable little girl."

Seldon sighed and looked troubled. "I'm sorry, but it's hard. Look at my hands. They're getting spotted, and soon they'll be gnarled. I can do hardly anything in the way of Twisting any longer. A child could probably force me to my knees."

"In what way does that make you different from other sixty-year-olds? At least your brain is working as well as ever. How often have you said that that's all that counts?"

"I know. But I miss my body."

Manella said, with just a touch of malice, "Especially when Dors doesn't seem to get any older."

Seldon said, uneasily, "Well, yes, I suppose—" He looked away, clearly unwilling to talk about the matter.

Manella considered her father-in-law gravely. The trouble was he knew nothing about children, or about people generally. It was hard to think that he had spent ten years as First Minister under the old Emperor and yet ended up knowing as little about people as he did.

Of course, he was entirely wrapped up in this Psychohistory of his, that dealt with quadrillions of people—which ultimately meant dealing with no people at all, as individuals. And how could he know about children when he had had no contact with any child except Raych, who had entered his life as a twelve-year-old? Now he had Wanda who was, and would probably remain to him, an utter mystery.

Manella thought all this lovingly. She had the incredible desire to protect Hari Seldon from a world he did not understand. It was the only point at which she and her mother-in-law, Dors Venabili, met and coalesced—this desire to protect Hari Seldon.

Manella had saved Seldon's life ten years before. Dors, in her strange way, had considered this an invasion of her prerogative and had never quite forgiven Manella.

Seldon, in his turn, had then saved Manella's life. She closed her eyes briefly, and the whole scene returned to her, almost as though it were happening to her right now.

3.

It was a week after the assassination of Cleon, and a horrible week it had been. All of Trantor had been in chaos, was still in chaos.

Hari Seldon still kept his office as First Minister, but it was clear he had no power. He called in Manella Dubanqua.

"I want to thank you for saving Raych's life and mine. I haven't had a chance to do so yet." Then, with a sigh, "I have scarcely had a chance to do anything this past week."

Manella asked, "What happened to the mad gardener?"

"Executed! At once! No trial! I tried to save him by pointing out that he was insane. But there was no question about it. If he had done anything else, committed any other crime, his madness would have been recognized and he would have been spared. Committed—locked up and treated, but spared, nonetheless. But to kill the Emperor—" Seldon shook his head sadly.

Manella said, "What's going to happen now, First Minister?"

"I'll tell you what I think. The Entun dynasty is finished. Neither of Cleon's sons will succeed. I don't think they want to. They fear assassination in their turn and I don't blame them. It would be much better for them to retire to one of the family estates on some Outer World and live a quiet life there. Because they are members of the Imperial House, they will undoubtedly be allowed to do this. You and I may be less fortunate."

Manella frowned. "In what way, sir?"

Seldon cleared his throat. "It is possible to argue that because you killed Gleb Andorin, he dropped his blaster, which became available to Mandell Gruber, who used it to kill Cleon. You therefore bear a strong share of the responsibility of the crime, and it may even be said that it was all pre-arranged."

"But that's ridiculous. I am a member of the Imperial Guard fulfilling my duties—doing what I was ordered to do."

Seldon smiled sadly. "You're arguing rationally, and rationality is not going to be in fashion for a while. What's going to happen now, in the absence of a legitimate successor to the Imperial throne, is that we are bound to have a military government."

(In later years, when Manella came to understand the workings of psychohistory, she wondered if Seldon had used the technique to determine what was going to happen, for the military rule certainly came to pass. At the time, however, he made no mention of his fledgling theory.)

"If we do have a military government," he went on, "then it will be necessary for them to establish a firm rule at once, crush any signs of disaffection, act vigorously and cruelly, even in defiance of rationality and justice. If they accuse you, Ms. Dubanqua, of being part of a plot to kill the Emperor, you will be slaughtered, not as an act of justice, but as a way of cowing the Trantorial people.

"For that matter, they might say that I was part of the plot, too. After all, I went out to greet the new gardeners when it was not my place to do so. Had I not done so, there would have been no attempt to kill me, you would not have struck back, and the Emperor would have lived. —Do you see how it all fits?"

"I can't believe they will do this."

"Perhaps they won't. I'll make them an offer that, just perhaps, they may not wish to refuse."

"What would that be?"

"I will offer to resign as First Minister. They don't want me. They won't have me; but the fact is that I do have people at Court and, even more important, in the Outer Worlds, who find me acceptable. That means that if the military force me out, then even if they don't execute me, they will have some trouble. If, on the other hand, I resign, stating that I believe the military government is what Trantor and the Empire need, then I actually help them, you see."

He mused a little and said, "Besides, there is the little matter of psychohistory."

(That was the first time Manella had ever heard the word.)

"What's that?"

"Something I'm working on. Cleon believed in its powers very strongly—more strongly than I did at the time—and there's a considerable feeling in the Court that psychohistory is, or might be, a powerful tool that could be made to work on the side of the government—whatever the government might be.

"Nor does it matter if they know nothing about the details of the science. I'd rather they didn't. Lack of knowledge can increase what we might call the superstitious aspect of the situation. In which case, they will let me continue working on my research as a private citizen. At least, I hope so. —And that brings me to you."

"What about me?"

"I'm going to ask as part of the deal that you be allowed to resign from the Imperial Guard and that no action be taken against you over the events in connection with the assassination. I ought to be able to get that."

"But you're talking about ending my career."

"Your career is, in any case, gone. Even if they don't work up an order of execution against you, can you imagine that you will be allowed to continue working for them?"

"But what do I do? How do I make a living?"

"I'll take care of that, Ms. Dubanqua. In all likelihood, I'll go back to Streeling University, with a large grant for my psychohistorical research, and I can find a place for you."

Manella, round-eyed, said, "Why should you—"

Seldon said, "I can't believe you're asking. You save Raych's life and mine. Is it conceivable that I don't owe you anything?"

And it was as he said. Seldon resigned gracefully from the post he had held for ten years. He was given a fulsome letter of appreciation for his services by the just-formed military government. He returned to Streeling University, and Manella Dubanqua, relieved of her own post, went with him and his family.

4.

Raych came in, blowing on his hands. "I'm all for deliberate variety in the weather. You don't want things under a dome to always be the same. Today, though, they made it just a little too cold, and worked up a wind besides. I think it's about time someone complained to Weather Control."

"I don't know that it's Weather Control's fault," said Seldon. "It's getting harder to control things in general."

"I know. Deterioration." Raych brushed his thick, black mustache with the back of his hand. He did that often, as though he had never quite managed to get over the few months during which he had been mustacheless in Wye. He had also put on a little weight about the middle and, overall, had come to seem very comfortable and middle-class. Even his Dahl accent had faded somewhat.

He took off his light coverall and said, "And how's the old birthday boy?"

"Resenting it. Wait, wait, my son. You'll be celebrating your fortieth birthday in two months. We'll see how funny you'll think that is."

"Not as funny as sixty."

"Stop joking," said Manella, who had been chafing Raych's hands, trying to warm them.

Seldon spread his own hands. "We're doing the wrong thing, Raych. Your wife is of the opinion that all this talk about sixty has sent little Wanda into a decline over the possibility of my dying."

"Really?" said Raych. "That accounts for it, then. I stopped in to see her and she told me at once, before I even had a chance to say a word, that she had had a bad dream. Was it about your dying?"

"Apparently," said Seldon.

"Well, she'll get over that. No way of stopping bad dreams."

"I'm not dismissing it that easily," said Manella. "She's brooding over it and that's not healthy. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"As you say, Manella," said Raych, agreeably. "You're my dear wife and whatever you say—about Wanda—goes." And he brushed his mustache again.

His dear wife! It hadn't been so easy to make her his dear wife. Raych remembered his mother's attitude toward the possibility. Talk about nightmares. It was he who had the periodic nightmares in which he had to face down the furious Dors Venabili once more.

5.

Raych's first clear memory, after emerging from his Desperance-induced ordeal, was that of being shaved.

He felt the vibro-razor moving along his cheek and he said, weakly, "Don't cut anywhere near my upper lip, barber. I want my mustache back."

The barber, who had already received his instructions from Seldon, held up a mirror to reassure him.

Dors Venabili, who was sitting at his bedside, said, "Let him work, Raych. Don't excite yourself."

Raych's eyes turned toward her momentarily, and he was quiet. When the barber left, she said, "How do you feel, Raych?"

"Rotten," he muttered. "I'm so depressed, I can't stand it."

"That's the lingering effect of the Desperance you've been dosed with. It will wash out."

"I can't believe it. How long has it been?"

"Never mind. It will take time. You were pumped full of it."

He looked about restlessly. "Has Manella been to see me?"

"The woman?" (Raych was to get used to hearing Dors speak of Manella with that word and in that tone of voice.) "No. You're not fit for visitors, yet."

Interpreting the look on Raych's face, Venabili quickly added, "I'm an exception because I'm your mother, Raych. Why would you want the woman to see you anyway? You're in no condition to be seen."

"All the more reason to see her," muttered Raych. "I want her to see me at my worst." He then turned to one side dispiritedly. "I want to sleep."

Dors Venabili shook her head. Later that day she said to Seldon, "I don't know what we're going to do about Raych, Hari. He's quite unreasonable."

Seldon said, "He's not well, Dors. Give the boy a chance."

"He keeps muttering about that woman. Whatever her name is."

"Manella Dubanqua. It's not a hard name to remember."

"I think he wants to set up housekeeping with her. Live with her. *Marry* her."

Seldon shrugged. "Raych is thirty—old enough to make up his own mind."

"As his parents, we have something to say, surely."

Hari sighed. "And I'm sure you'll say it, Dors. And once you've said it, I'm sure he'll do as he wishes."

"Is that your final word? Do you intend to do nothing while he makes plans to marry a woman like that?"

"What do you expect me to do, Dors? She saved Raych's life. Do you expect him to forget that? She saved mine, too, for that matter."

That seemed to feed Dors's anger. She said, "And you also saved her. The score is even."

"I didn't exactly—"

"Of course you did. The military rascals who now run the Empire would have slaughtered her if you didn't step in and sell them your resignation and your support in order to save her."

"Though I may have evened the score, which I don't think I have, Raych has not. And, Dors dear, I would be very careful when it came to using unfortunate terms to describe our government. These times are not going to be as easy as the times when Cleon ruled, and there will always be informers to repeat what they hear you say."

"Never mind that. I don't like that woman. I presume that, at least, is permissible."

"Permissible, certainly, but of no use."

Hari looked down at the floor, deep in thought. Dors's usually unfathomable black eyes were positively flashing in anger. Hari looked up.

"What I'd like to know, Dors, is *why?* Why do you dislike Manella so? She saved our lives. If it had not been for her quick action, both Raych and I would be dead."

Dors snapped back, "Yes, Hari. I know that better than anyone. And if she had not been there I would not have been able to do a thing to prevent your murder. I suppose you think I should be grateful. But it is as if every time I look at that woman I am reminded of *my* failure. I know my feelings are not rational—that is something I am at a loss to explain. So do not ask me to like her, Hari. I cannot."

But the next day even Dors had to back down when the doctor said, "Your son wishes to see a woman named Manella."

"He's in no condition to see visitors," snapped Dors.

"On the contrary. He is. He's doing quite well. Besides, he insists, and is doing so most strenuously. I don't know that we'd be wise to refuse him."

So they brought in Manella and Raych greeted her effusively and with the first faint sign of happiness since he had arrived at the hospital.

He made an unmistakable small gesture of dismissal at Dors. Lips tightened, she left.

And the day came when Raych said, "She'll have me, Mom."

Dors said, "Do you expect me to be surprised, you foolish man? Of course she'll have you. You're her only chance, now that she's been disgraced, ousted from the Imperial Guard. . . ."

Raych said, "Mom, if you're trying to lose me, this is exactly the way of doing it. Don't say things like that."

"I'm only thinking of your welfare."

"I'll think of my own good, thank you. I'm no one's ticket to respectability, if you'll stop to think of it. I'm not exactly handsome. I'm short. Dad isn't First Minister any more, and I talk solid lower-class. What's there for her to be proud of in me? She can do a lot better, but she wants me. And let me tell you, I want her."

"But you know what she is."

"Of course I know what she is. She's a woman who loves me. She's the woman I love. That's what she is."

"And before you fell in love with her, what was she? You know some of what she had to do while undercover in Wye—*you* were one of her 'assignments.' How many others were there? Are you able to live with her past? With what she did in the name of duty? Now you can afford to be idealistic. But someday, you will have your first quarrel with her, or your second, or your nineteenth, and you'll break down and say, 'You wh—' "

Raych shouted angrily. "Don't say that! When we fight, I'll call her unreasonable, irrational, nagging, whining, inconsiderate—a million adjectives that will fit the situation. And she'll have words for me. But they'll all be sensible words that can be withdrawn when the fit is over."

"You think so—but wait till it happens."

Raych had turned white. He said, "Mother, you've been with Father now for almost twenty years. Father is a hard man to disagree with, but there have been times when you two have disagreed. I've heard you. In all those twenty years, has he ever called you by any name that would in any way compromise your role as human being? For that matter, have I done so? Can you conceive me doing so now—no matter how angry I get?"

Dors struggled. Her face did not show emotion in quite the same way that Raych's did, or Seldon's would, but it was clear that she was momentarily incapable of speech.

"In fact," said Raych, pushing his advantage (and feeling horrible at doing so) "what it is, is that you are jealous of Manella saving Dad's life. You don't want anyone to do that but you. Well, you had no chance to do so. Would you rather Manella had held her hand and Dad had died? And I, too?"

Dors said, in a choked voice. "He insisted on going out to meet the gardeners alone. He would not allow me to come."

"But that was not Manella's fault."

"Is that why you want to marry her? Gratitude?"

"No. Love."

And so it was—but Manella said to Raych after the ceremony, "Your mother may have attended the wedding because you insisted, Raych, but she looked like one of those thunderclouds they sometimes send sailing under the dome."

Raych laughed. "She doesn't have the face for thunderclouds. You're just imagining it."

"Not at all. How do we get her to give us a chance?"

"We'll just be patient. She'll get over it."

But Dors Venabili didn't.

Two years after the wedding, Wanda was born. Dors's attitude toward the child was all Raych and Manella could have wanted, but Wanda's mother remained "that woman" to Raych's mother.

6.

Hari Seldon was fighting off melancholy. He was lectured in turn by Dors, by Raych, by Yugo and by Manella. All united to tell him that sixty was not old.

They simply did not understand. He had been thirty when the first hint of psychohistory had come to him, thirty-two when he delivered his famous lecture at the Decennial Convention, following which everything seemed to happen to him at once. He had fled across Trantor and met Demerzel, Cleon, Dors, Yugo, and Raych, to say nothing of the people of Mycogen, of Dahl, and of Wye.

He was forty when he became First Minister, and fifty when he relinquished the post. Now he was sixty.

He had spent thirty years on psychohistory. How many more years would he require? How many more years would he live? Would he die with the Psychohistory Project unfinished after all?

It was not the dying that bothered him, he told himself. It was the matter of leaving the Psychohistory Project unfinished.

He went to see Yugo Amaryl. In recent years, they had somehow drifted apart, as the Psychohistory Project increased steadily in size. In the first years at Streeling, it had merely been Seldon and Amaryl, no one else, working together shoulder-to-shoulder *always*. Now—

Amaryl was nearly fifty—not exactly a young man, and he had somehow lost his spark. In all these years, he had developed no interest in anything but psychohistory. No woman had entered his life, no companion, no hobby, no subsidiary activity.

Amaryl blinked at Seldon, who couldn't help but note the changes in the man's appearance. Part of it may have been because he had had to have his eyes reconstructed. He saw perfectly well, but there was an unnatural look about them, and he tended to blink slowly. It made him appear sleepy.

"What do you think, Yugo?" said Seldon. "Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?"

"Light? Yes, as a matter of fact," said Amaryl. "There's this new fellow, Tamwile Elar. You know him, of course."

"Oh, yes. I'm the one who hired him. Very vigorous and aggressive. How's he doing?"

"I can't say I'm really comfortable with him, Hari. He's got a loud laugh. But he's brilliant. The new system of equations fits right into the Prime Radiant, and they seem to make it possible to get around the problem of chaos."

"Seem? Or will?"

"Too early to say will, but I'm very hopeful. I have tried a number of things that would have broken them down if they were worthless, and the new equations survived them all. I'm beginning to think of them as 'the achaotic equations.' "

"I don't imagine," said Seldon, "we have anything like a rigorous demonstration concerning these equations?"

"No, we don't, though I've got a half a dozen people working on it, including Elar, of course." Amaryl turned on his Prime Radiant—which was every bit as advanced as Seldon's was—and he watched as the curving lines of luminous equations curled in midair—too small, too fine to be read without amplification. "Add the new equations and we may be able to begin to predict."

"Each time I study the Prime Radiant now," said Seldon, thoughtfully, "I wonder at the Electro-Clarifier and how tightly it squeezes material into the lines and curves of the future. Wasn't that Elar's product, too?"

"Yes. With the help of Cinda Monay, who designed it."

"It's good to have new and brilliant men and women in the Project. It reconciles me to the future."

"You think someone like Elar may be heading the Project some day?" asked Amaryl, still studying the Radiant.

"Maybe. After you and I have retired, or died."

Amaryl seemed to relax and turned off the device. "I would like to complete the task, before we retire—or die."

"So would I, Yugo. So would I."

"Psychohistory has guided us pretty well in the last ten years."

That was true enough, but Seldon knew one couldn't attach too much triumph to that. Things had gone smoothly and without major surprises.

Psychohistory had predicted that the center would hold after Cleon's death—predicted it, in a very dim and uncertain way—and it did hold. Trantor was reasonably quiet. Even with an assassination and the end of a dynasty, the center had held.

It did so under the stress of military rule—Dors was quite right in speaking of the junta as "those military rascals." She might have gone farther in her accusations without going wrong. Nevertheless, they were holding the Empire together and would continue to do so for a time. Long enough, perhaps to allow psychohistory to play an active role in the events that were to transpire.

Lately, Yugo had been speaking about the possible establishment of Foundations—separate, isolated, independent of the Empire itself—serving as seeds for developments through the forthcoming dark ages and into a new and better Empire. Seldon himself had been working on the consequences of such an arrangement.

But he lacked the time and, he felt (with a certain misery), he lacked the youth as well. His mind, however firm and steady, did not have the resiliency and creativity that it had had when he was thirty and with each passing year, he knew he would have less.

Perhaps he ought to put the young and brilliant Elar on the task, taking him off everything else. Seldon had to admit to himself, shamefacedly, that the possibility did not excite him. He did not want to have invented psychohistory so that some stripling could come in and reap the final fruits of fame. In fact, to put it at its most disgraceful, Seldon felt jealous of Elar and realized it just sufficiently to feel the shame of it.

Yet, regardless of his less rational feelings, he would have to depend on other younger men—whatever his discomfort over it. Psychohistory was no longer the private preserve of himself and Amaryl and a few assistants. The decade of his being First Minister had converted it into a large government-sanctioned and budgeted undertaking and, quite to his surprise, after retiring from his post as First Minister, and returning to Streeling University, it had grown still larger. Hari grimaced at its ponderous—and pompous—official name: the *Seldon Psychohistory Project at Streeling*. But most people simply referred to it as the Project.

The military junta apparently saw the Project as a possible political weapon and while that was so, funding was no problem. It poured in. In return, there were annual reports, which, however, were quite opaque. Only fringe matters were reported on and even then the mathematics was not likely to be within the purview of any of the members of the junta.

It was clear as he left his old assistant that Amaryl, at least, was more than satisfied with the way psychohistory was going, and yet Seldon felt the blanket of depression settle over him once more.

He decided it was the forthcoming birthday party that was bothering him. It was meant as a celebration of joy, but to Hari it was not even a gesture of consolation. It merely emphasized his age.

Besides, it was upsetting his routine and Hari was a creature of habit. His office and a number of those adjoining it had been cleared out, and it had been days since he had been able to work normally. His proper offices would be converted into halls of glory, he supposed, and it would be many days before he could get back to work. Only Amaryl absolutely refused to budge and was able to maintain his office.

Seldon had wondered, peevishly, who had thought of doing all this. It wasn't Dors, of course. She knew him entirely too well. Not Amaryl or

Raych, who never even remembered their own birthdays. He had suspected Manella and had even confronted her on the matter.

She admitted that she was all for it and had given orders for the arrangements to take place, but she said that the idea for the birthday party had been suggested to her by Tamwile Elar.

The brilliant one, thought Seldon. Brilliant in everything.

He sighed. If only the birthday were all over.

7.

Dors poked her head through the door. "Am I allowed in?"

She entered Hari's temporary office, which was located in the Reference wing of the Psychohistory Building at Streeling. Here, specially trained Project members spent their days combing holofiles for the arcane data requested by the Research Division, Hari's usual area.

Dors perched on the edge of the one extra chair in the room, her back, as always, ramrod straight. Behind her, stacked against the wall, were a number of Hari's instruments.

"I've been talking to Wanda about her dream—"

Seldon made a gargling sound in the back of his throat, then said, "I can't believe it. Just let it go."

"No. Did you bother to ask her for the details of the dream?"

"Why should I put the little girl through that?"

"Neither did Raych, nor Manella. It was left up to me."

"But why should you torture her with questions about it?"

"Because I had the feeling I ought to," said Dors, grimly. "In the first place, she didn't have the dream in her bed."

"Where, then?"

"In your office."

"What was she doing in my office?"

"She wanted to see the place where the party would be and she walked into your office and, of course, there was nothing to see as it's been cleared out in preparation. But your chair was still there. The large one, tall back, tall wings, broken down—the one you won't let me replace."

Hari sighed recalling a long-standing disagreement. "It's not broken down. I don't want a new one. Go on."

"She curled up in the chair and began to brood over the fact that maybe you weren't really going to have a party, and she felt bad. Then, she tells me, she must have fallen asleep because nothing is clear in her mind except that in her dream there were two men—not women, she was sure about that—two men, talking."

"And what were they talking about?"

"She doesn't know exactly. You know how difficult it is to remember details under such circumstances. But she says it was about dying and she thought it was you because you were so old. And she remembers two words clearly. They were 'lemonade death.' "

"What?"

"Lemonade death."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. In any case, the talking ceased, the men left, and there she was in the chair, cold and frightened—and she's been upset about it ever since."

Seldon mulled over Dors's report. Then he said, "Look, dear, what importance can we attach to a child's dream?"

"We can ask ourselves first, Hari, if it even was a dream."

"What do you mean?"

"Wanda doesn't say outright it was. She says she 'must have fallen asleep.' Those are her words. She didn't say she fell asleep, she said she *must have* fallen asleep."

"What do you deduce from that?"

"She may have drifted off into a half-doze and, in that state, heard two men—two real men, not two dream-men—talking."

"Real men? Talking about killing me with lemonade death?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Dors," said Seldon, forcefully. "I know that you're forever foreseeing danger for me, but this is going too far. Why should anyone want to kill me?"

"It's been tried twice before."

"So it has, but consider the circumstances. The first attempt came shortly after the old Emperor Cleon made me First Minister. Naturally, this was an offense to the well-established Court hierarchy and I was much resented. A few thought they might settle matters by getting rid of me. The second time was when the Joranumites were trying to seize power and they thought I was standing in their way—plus Namarti's distorted dream of revenge.

"Fortunately, neither assassination attempt succeeded, but why should there now be a third? I am no longer First Minister and haven't been for ten years. I am an aging mathematician in retirement and surely no one has anything to fear from me. The Joranumites have been rooted out and destroyed and Namarti executed long ago. There is absolutely no motivation for anyone to want to kill me.

"So please, Dors, relax. When you're nervous about me, you get unsettled, which makes you more nervous still, and I don't want that to happen."

Dors rose from her seat and leaned across Hari's desk. "It's easy for you to say that there is no motive to kill you, but none is needed. Our government now is a completely irresponsible one and if they wish—"

"Stop!" commanded Seldon, loudly. Then, very quietly, "Not a word, Dors. Not a word against the government. That could get us in the very trouble you're busy foreseeing."

"I'm only talking to you, Hari."

"Right now you are, but if you get into the habit of saying foolish things, you don't know when something will slip out in someone else's presence—someone who will then be glad to report you. Just learn, as a matter of necessity, to refrain from political commentary."

"I'll try, Hari," said Dors, but she could not keep the indignation out of her voice. She turned on her heel and left.

Seldon watched her go. Dors had aged gracefully, so gracefully that at times she seemed not to have aged at all. Though she was about Seldon's age, her appearance had not changed nearly as much as his had in the twenty-eight years they had been together. Naturally.

Her hair was frosted with gray, but the youthful lustre beneath the gray still shone through. Her complexion had grown more sallow; her voice was a bit huskier, and, of course, she wore clothes that were suitable for middle age. However, her movements were as agile and as quick as ever. It was as if nothing could be allowed to interfere with her ability to protect Hari in case of emergency.

Hari sighed. This business of being protected, more or less against his will, at all times, was sometimes a heavy burden.

8.

Manella came to see Seldon almost immediately afterward.

"Pardon me, Hari, but what has Dors been saying?"

Seldon looked up again. Nothing but interruptions.

"It wasn't anything important. Wanda's dream."

Manella's lips pursed. "I knew it. Wanda said Dors was asking her questions about it. Why doesn't she leave the girl alone? You would think that having a bad dream was some sort of felony."

"As a matter of fact," said Seldon, soothingly, "It's just a matter of something Wanda came up with as part of the dream. I don't know if Wanda told you, but apparently, in her dream, she heard something about 'lemonade death.' "

"Hmm!" Manella was silent for a moment. Then she said, "That doesn't really matter so much. Wanda is crazy about lemonade and she's expecting lots of it at the party. I promised she'd have some with Mycogenian drops in it and she's looking forward to it."

"So that if she heard something that sounded anything like lemonade, it would be translated into lemonade in her mind."

"Yes. Why not?"

"Except that, in that case, what do you suppose it was that was *actually* said? She must have heard something in order to misinterpret it."

"I don't think that's necessarily so. But why are we attaching so much importance to a little girl's dream? Please, I don't want anyone talking to her about it anymore. It's too upsetting."

"I agree. I'll see to it that Dors drops the subject—at least with Wanda."

"All right. I don't care if she is Wanda's grandmother, Hari. I'm her mother, after all, and my wishes come first."

"Absolutely," said Seldon, pacifically, and looked after her as she left.

That was another burden—the unending unreasonable competition between those two women.

9.

Tamwile Elar was thirty-six years old and had joined Seldon's Project as Senior Mathematician four years earlier. He was a tall man, with a habitual twinkle in his eye and with just a habitual touch of self-assurance as well.

His hair was brown and had a loose wave in it, the more noticeable because he wore it rather long. He had an abrupt way of laughing, and there was no fault to be found with his mathematical ability.

Elar had been recruited from the University of West Mandanov and Seldon always had to smile when he remembered how suspicious Yugo Amaryl had been of him at first. But then, Amaryl was suspicious of everyone. Deep in his heart (Seldon felt sure) Amaryl felt that psychohistory ought to have remained his and Hari's private province.

But even Amaryl was now willing to admit that Elar's membership in the group had eased the situation for Amaryl tremendously. He said, "His techniques for avoiding chaos are unique and fascinating. No one in the project could have worked it out as he did. Certainly, nothing of his sort ever occurred to me. It didn't occur to you, either, Hari."

"Well," said Seldon, grumpily, "I'm getting old."

"If only," said Amaryl, "he didn't laugh so loud."

Yet the truth was that Seldon found himself having a little trouble accepting Elar. It was rather humiliating that he himself had come nowhere near the "achaotic equations" as they were now called. It didn't bother Seldon that he had never thought of the principle behind the Electro-Clarifier—that was not really his field. The achaotic equations, however, he should indeed have thought of, or at least gotten close to.

He tried reasoning with himself. Seldon had worked out the entire basis for psychohistory, and the achaotic equations grew naturally out of that basis. Could Elar have done Seldon's work three decades earlier? Seldon was convinced he couldn't. And was it so remarkable thinking up the principle of achaotism once the basis was in place?

All this was very sensible and very true and yet Seldon still found himself uneasy when facing Elar. Just slightly edgy. Weary age facing flamboyant youth.

Yet Elar never gave him obvious cause for feeling the difference in years. He never failed to show Seldon full respect or, in any way, seemed to imply that the older man had passed his prime.

Of course, Elar was interested in the forthcoming festivities, and had even, Seldon had found out, been the first to suggest that Seldon's birthday be celebrated. (Was this a nasty emphasis on Seldon's age? Seldon dismissed the possibility. He would be picking up some of Dors' tricks of suspicion if he believed that.)

Elar strode toward him and said, "Maestro—" and Selden winced as always. He much preferred to have the senior members of the Project call him Hari, but it seemed such a small point to make a fuss over.

"Maestro," said Elar. "The word is out that you've been called in for a conference with General Tennar."

"Yes. He's the new Head, and I suppose he wants to see me to ask what psychohistory is all about. They've been asking me that since the days of Cleon and Demerzel." (The new Head! The junta was like a kaleidoscope, with some of its members periodically falling from grace, and others rising from nowhere.)

"But it's my understanding he wants it now—right in the middle of the birthday celebration."

"That doesn't matter. You can all celebrate without me."

"No, we can't, Maestro. I hope you don't mind, but some of us got together and put in a call to the Appointments Chamberlain and put it off for a week."

"What!" said Seldon, annoyed. "Surely that was presumptuous of you—and risky besides."

"It worked well. They've put it off, and you'll need that time."

"Why would I need a week?"

Elar hesitated. "May I speak frankly, Maestro?"

"Of course you can. When have I ever asked that anyone speak to me in any way but frankly?"

Elar flushed slightly—his fair skin showed reddening easily—but his voice remained steady. "It's not easy to say this, Maestro. You're a genius at mathematics. No one on the Project has any doubt of that. No one in the Empire, if they knew you and understood mathematics, would have any doubt about it. However, it is not given to anybody to be a universal genius."

"I know that as well as you do, Elar."

"I know you do. Specifically, though, you lack the ability to handle ordinary people—shall we say, stupid people. You lack a certain deviousness, a certain ability to side-step, and if you are dealing with someone who is both powerful in government and somewhat stupid, you can easily endanger the Project and, for that matter, your own life, simply because you are too frankly simple."

"What is this? Am I suddenly a child? I've been dealing with politicians for a long time. I was First Minister for ten years, as perhaps you may remember."

"Forgive me, Maestro, but you were not an extraordinarily effective one. You dealt with the old First Minister, Demerzel, who was very intelligent, by all accounts, and with the Emperor Cleon, who was very friendly. Now you will encounter military people who are neither intelligent nor friendly—another matter entirely."

"I've even dealt with military people and survived."

"Not with General Dugal Tennar. He's another sort of thing altogether. I know him."

"You know him? You have met him?"

"I don't know him personally, but he's from Mandanov, which, as you know, is my sector, and he was a power there before he joined the junta and rose through its ranks."

"And what do you know about him?"

"Ignorant, superstitious, violent. He is not someone you can handle easily, or safely. You can use the week to work out methods for dealing with him."

Seldon bit his lower lip. There was something to what Elar said, and Seldon recognized the fact that, while he had plans of his own, it would still be difficult to try to manipulate a stupid, self-important, short-tempered person with overwhelming force at his disposal.

He said, uneasily, "I'll manage somehow. The whole matter of a military junta is, in any case, an unstable situation in the Trantor of today. It has already lasted longer than might have seemed likely."

"Have we been testing that? I was not aware that we were making stability-decisions on the junta."

"Just a few calculations by Amaryl making use of your achaotic equations." He paused. "By the way, I've come across some references to them as the Elar Equations."

"Not by me, Maestro."

"I hope you don't mind, but I don't want that. Psychohistoric elements are to be described functionally and not personally. As soon as personalities intervene, bad feelings arise."

"I understand, and quite agree, Maestro."

"In fact," said Seldon, with a touch of guilt, "I have always felt it wrong that we speak of the basic Seldon equations of psychohistory. The trouble is that's been in use for so many years, it's not practical to try to change it."

"If you'll excuse my saying so, Maestro, you're an exceptional case. No one, I think, would quarrel with your receiving full credit for inventing the science of psychohistory. —But, if I may, I wish to get back to your meeting with General Tennar."

"Well, what else is there to say?"

"I can't help but wonder if it might be better if you did not see him, did not speak to him, did not deal with him."

"How am I to avoid that if he calls me in for a conference?"

"Perhaps you can plead illness, and send someone in your place."

"Whom?"

Elar was silent for a moment, but his silence was eloquent.

Seldon said, "You, I take it."

"Might that not be the thing to do? I am a fellow-sectoral citizen of the general, which may have weight. You are a busy man, getting on in years, and it would be easy to believe that you are not entirely well. And if I see him rather than you—please excuse me, Maestro—I can wiggle and maneuver more easily than you can."

"Lie, you mean."

"If necessary."

"You'll be taking a huge chance."

"Not too huge. I doubt that he will order my execution. If he becomes annoyed with me, as he well might, then I can plead—or you can plead on my behalf—youth and inexperience. In any case, if I get into trouble that will be far less dangerous than if you were to do so. I'm thinking of the Project, which can do without me a great deal more easily than it can do without you."

Seldon said, with a frown, "I'm not going to hide behind you, Elar. If the man wants to see me, he will see me. I refuse to shiver and shake and ask you to take chances for me. What do you think I am?"

"A frank and honest man, when the need is for a devious one."

"I will manage to be devious, if I must. Please don't underestimate me, Elar."

Elar shrugged hopelessly. "Very well. I can only argue with you up to a certain point."

"In fact, Elar, I wish you had not postponed the meeting. I would rather skip my birthday and see the General than the reverse. This birthday celebration was not my idea." His voice died away in a grumble.

Elar said, "I'm sorry."

"Well," said Seldon, in resignation, "We'll see what happens."

He turned and left. Sometimes, he wished ardently he could run what was called a "tight ship," make sure that everything went as he wished it to, and leave little or no room for maneuver among his subordinates. To do that, however, would take an enormous amount of time, enormous effort, and would deprive him of any chance of working on psychohistory himself. Besides, he simply lacked the temperament for it.

He sighed. He would have to speak to Amaryl.

10.

Seldon strode into Amaryl's office unannounced.

"Yugo," said Hari Seldon, rather abruptly, "the session with General Tennar has been postponed." He seated himself in a rather pettish manner.

It took Amaryl his usual few moments to disconnect his mind from his work. Looking up, finally, he said, "What was his excuse?"

"It wasn't he. Some of our mathematicians arranged a week's postponement so that it wouldn't interfere with the birthday celebration. Really annoying."

"Why do you let them do that?"

"I didn't. They just went ahead and *arranged* things." Seldon shrugged. "In a way it's my fault. I've whined so long about turning sixty that everyone thinks they have to cheer me up with festivities. My fault."

Amaryl said, "Of course, we can use the week."

Seldon sat forward in immediate tension, "Is something wrong?"

"No. Not that I can see, but it won't hurt to examine it further. Look, Hari, this is the first time in nearly thirty years that psychohistory has reached the point where it can actually make a prediction. It's not much of one; just a small pinch of the vast continent of humanity; but it's the best we've had so far. All right. We want to take advantage of that, see how it works, prove to ourselves that psychohistory is what we think it is, a predictive science. So it won't hurt to make sure that we haven't overlooked anything. Even this tiny bit of prediction is complex, and I welcome another week of study."

"Very well, then. I'll consult you on the matter before I go to see the General for any last minute modifications that have to be made. Meanwhile, Amaryl, do not allow any information concerning this to leak out to the others, not to anyone. If it fails, I don't want the people of the Project to grow downhearted. You and I will absorb the failure ourselves and keep on trying."

A rare, wistful smile crossed Amaryl's face. "You and I. Do you remember when it really was you and I? Just the two of us?"

"I remember it very well, and don't think I don't miss those days. We didn't have much to work with—"

"Not even the Prime Radiant, let alone the Electro-Clarifier."

"But those were happy days."

"Happy," said Amaryl, nodding his head.

11.

The university had been transformed and Hari Seldon could not refrain from being pleased.

The central rooms of the Project Complex had suddenly sprouted in color and light, with holography filling the air with shifting photos of Seldon at different places and different times. There was Dors Venabili smiling, and actually looking somewhat younger. There was Raych as a teen-ager, still unpolished. At one moment, Seldon and Amaryl, looking unbelievably young, were bent over their computers. There was even a fleeting sight of Demerzel, which filled Selden's heart with yearning, for he had never again experienced the security he had felt before Demerzel had left.

The Emperor Cleon appeared nowhere in the holographies. It was not because holographs of him did not exist, but it was not wise, under the rule of the junta, to remind people of the past Imperium.

It all poured outward, overflowing, filling room after room, building after building. Somehow, time had been found to convert the entire university into a display like nothing Seldon had ever seen or imagined. Even the dome lights were darkened to produce an artificial night against which the university would sparkle for three days.

"Three days!" said Seldon, half-impressed, half-horrified.

"Three days," said Dors Venabili, nodding her head. "The university would consider nothing less."

"The expense! The labor!" said Seldon, frowning.

"The expense is easily borne," said Dors. "What you have done for the university far outweighs anything this little demonstration would cost. And the labor is all volunteer. The students turned out and took care of everything."

A from-the-air view of the university appeared now, panoramically, and Seldon stared at it, with a smile forcing itself onto his countenance.

Dors said, "You're pleased. You've done nothing but grouse this last month about how you didn't want any celebration for being an old man, and now look at you."

"Well, it is flattering. I had no idea that they would do anything like this."

"Why not? You're an icon, Hari. The whole world, the whole Empire knows about you."

"They do not," said Seldon, shaking his head vigorously. "Not one in a billion knows anything at all about me, and certainly not about psychohistory. No one outside the Project has the faintest knowledge of how psychohistory works, and not everyone inside does."

"That doesn't matter, Hari. It's *you*. Even the quadrillions who don't know anything about you or your work know that Hari Seldon is the greatest mathematician in the Empire."

"Well," said Seldon, looking about, "they certainly are making me feel that way right now. But three days and three nights! The place will be reduced to splinters."

"No, it won't. All the records have been stored away. All the computers and other equipment have been secured. The students have set up a virtual police force that will prevent anything from being damaged."

"You've seen to all of that, haven't you, Dors?" said Seldon, smiling at her fondly.

"A number of us have. It's by no means all me. Your colleague, Tamwile Elar, has worked away with incredible dedication."

Seldon made a face.

"Why?" said Dors. "What's the matter with Elar?"

Seldon said, "He keeps calling me 'Maestro.' "

Dors shook her head, "Well, there's a terrible crime."

Seldon ignored that and said, "And he's young."

"Worse and worse. —Come, Hari, you're going to have to learn to grow old gracefully, and to begin with you'll have to show that you're enjoying yourself. That will please others and increase their enjoyment, and surely you would want to do that. Come on. Move around. Don't hide here with me. Greet everyone. Smile. Ask after their health. And remember that after the banquet, you're going to have to make a speech."

"I dislike banquets, and I doubly dislike speeches."

"You'll have to, anyway. Now move!"

Seldon sighed dramatically, and did as he was told. He cut quite an imposing figure as he stood in the archway leading into the main hall. The voluminous First Minister's robes of yesteryear were gone, as were the brightly colored Heliconian-style garments he had favored in his youth. Now Seldon wore an outfit that bespoke his elevated status: straight pants, crisply pleated, a modified tunic on top. Embroidered in silver thread above his heart was the insignia of the STREELING UNIVERSITY PSYCHOHISTORY PROJECT. It stood out like a beacon against the dignified titanium-gray hue of his clothing. Seldon's eyes twinkled in a face now lined by age, his sixty years given away as much by the wrinkles as by the soft white streaks in his hair.

He entered the room in which the children were feasting. The room had been entirely cleared except for trestles with food upon them. The children rushed to him as soon as they saw him, knowing, as they did, that he was the founder of the feast, and Seldon tried to avoid the clutching fingers.

"Wait, wait, children," he said, "Now stand back."

He pulled a small, computerized robot from his pocket and placed it on the floor. In an Empire without robots, this was something that he could expect to be eye-popping. It had the shape of a small furry animal, but it also had the capacity to change that shape without warning (eliciting squeals of laughter from the children each time), and when it did so, the sounds and motions it made changed as well.

"Watch it," said Seldon, "and play with it, and try not to break it. Later on, there'll be one for each of you."

He slipped out into the corridor leading back to the main hall and realized, as he did so, that Wanda was following him.

"Grandpa," she said.

Well, of course, Wanda was different. He swooped down and lifted her high in the air, turned her over, and put her down.

"Are you having a good time, Wanda?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "but don't go into that room."

"Why not, Wanda? It's my room. It's my office where I work."

"It's where I had my bad dream."

"I know, Wanda, but that's all over, isn't it?" He hesitated, then he led Wanda to one of the chairs lining the corridor. He sat down and placed her in his lap.

"Wanda," he said, "are you sure it was a dream?"

"I think it was a dream."

"Were you really sleeping?"

"I think I was."

She seemed uncomfortable talking about it, and Seldon had to let it go. There was no use pushing her any further.

He said, "Well, dream or not, there were two men and they talked of lemonade death, didn't they?"

Wanda nodded reluctantly.

Seldon said, "You're sure they said lemonade?"

Wanda nodded again.

"Might they have said something else, and you thought they said lemonade?"

"Lemonade is what they said."

Seldon had to be satisfied with that. "Well, run off and have a good time, Wanda. Forget about the dream."

"All right, Grandpa." She cheered up as soon as the matter of the dream was dismissed. She jumped off his lap and off she went.

Seldon went off in search of Manella. It took him an extraordinary while to find her since, at every step, he was stopped, greeted, and conversed with.

Finally, he saw her in the distance. Muttering, "Pardon me— Pardon me— There's someone I must— Pardon me—" he worked his way to her with considerable trouble.

"Manella," he said, and drew her off to one side, smiling mechanically in all directions.

"Yes, Hari," she said, "Is something wrong?"

"It's Wanda's dream."

"Don't tell me she's still talking about it."

"Well, it's still bothering her. Listen, we have lemonade at the party, haven't we?"

"Of course, the children adore it. I've added a couple of dozen different Mycogenian taste-buds to very small glasses of different shapes and the children try them one after the other to see which taste best. The adults have been drinking it, too. I have. Why don't you taste it, Hari? It's great."

"I'm thinking. If it wasn't a dream, if the child really heard two men speak of lemonade death—" He paused, as though ashamed to continue.

Manella said, "Are you thinking that someone poisoned the lemonade? That's ridiculous. By now every child in the place would be sick or dying."

"I know," muttered Seldon. "I know."

He wandered off and almost didn't see Dors when he passed her. She seized his elbow.

"Why the face?" she said. "You look concerned."

"I've been thinking of Wanda's lemonade death."

"So have I, but I can't make anything of it so far."

"I can't help but think of the possibility of poisoning."

"Don't. I assure you that every bit of food and drink that came into this party has been molecularly checked. I know you'll think that's my typical paranoia, but my task is guarding you and that is what I must do."

"And everything is—"

"No poison. I promise you."

Seldon smiled. "Well, good. That's a relief. I didn't really think—"

"Let's hope not," said Dors dryly, "What concerns me far more than this myth of poison is that I have heard that you're going to be seeing that monster, Tennar, in a few days."

"Don't call him a monster, Dors. Be careful. We're surrounded by ears and tongues."

Dors immediately lowered her voice. "I suppose you're right. Look around. All these smiling faces—and yet who knows which of our 'friends' will be reporting back to the Head and his henchmen when the night is over? Ah, humans! Even after all these millennia, to think that such base treachery still exists. It seems to me to be so unnecessary. But I suppose I still don't quite grasp basic human nature. Yet I know it exists, and the harm it can do. That is why I must go with you, Hari."

"Impossible, Dors. It would just complicate matters for me. I'll go myself and I'll have no trouble."

"You would have no idea how to handle the general."

Seldon looked grave. "And you would? You sound exactly like Elar. He, too, is convinced that I am a helpless ninny. He, too, wants to come with me, or to go in my place. —I wonder how many people on Trantor are willing to take my place?" He added with clear sarcasm, "Dozens? Millions?"

12.

For ten years, the Galactic Empire had been without an Emperor, but there was no indication that that was so in the way in which the Imperial Palace Grounds operated. Millennia of custom made the absence of an Emperor meaningless.

It meant, of course, that there was no figure in Imperial robes to preside over formalities of one sort or another. No Imperial voice gave its orders; no Imperial wishes made themselves known; no Imperial gratifications or annoyances made themselves felt; no Imperial pleasures warmed the palaces; no Imperial sickness gloomed them. The Emperor's own quarters were empty; the Imperial family did not exist.

And yet the army of gardeners kept the grounds in perfect condition. An army of service people kept the buildings in top shape. The Emperor's bed, never slept in, was made with fresh sheets every day; the rooms were cleaned; everything worked as it always worked; and the entire Imperial staff from top to bottom, saving only the Emperor and his family, worked as they had always worked. Those on top gave commands as they would have done if the Emperor had lived, commands that they knew the Emperor would have given. In many cases, in particular in the higher echelons, the personnel were the same as those who had been there on Cleon's last day of life. The new personnel who had been taken on were carefully molded and trained into the traditions they would have to serve.

It was as though the Empire, accustomed to the rule of an Emperor, insisted on the ghost-rule of an Absence; and that only so could the Empire be held together.

The junta knew this; or, if they didn't, they felt it vaguely. In ten years, none of those military men who now commanded the Empire had moved into the Emperor's private quarters. Whatever they were, they were not Imperial and they had no rights there. A populace that endured the loss of liberty would not endure any sign of irreverence to the Emperor, alive or dead.

Even General Tennar made no move toward the graceful structures that for so long had housed the Emperors of a dozen different dynasties.

"I can establish," he said, "a dynasty of my own."

He had made his home and office in one of the structures built on the outskirts of the grounds—eyesores, but built along the line of fortresses, strong enough to withstand a siege and with outlying buildings in which a force of guards was housed.

Tennar was a stocky man, with a mustache. It was not a vigorous, overflowing Dahlite mustache, but one that was carefully clipped and fitted to the upper lip, leaving a strip of skin between the hair and the line of the lip. It was a reddish mustache and Tennar had cold, blue eyes. He had probably been a handsome man in his younger days, but his face was pudgy now, and his eyes were slits that expressed anger more often than any other emotion.

So he said, angrily (as one would, who was a general and who felt himself to be absolute master of millions of worlds, and yet who dared not call himself an Emperor) to Hender Linn, "I can establish a dynasty of my own." He looked about him with a scowl. "This is not a fitting place for the master of the Empire."

Linn said softly, "To be master is what is important. Better master in a cubicle, than figurehead in a palace."

"Best yet, to be master in a palace. Why not?"

Linn bore the title of colonel, but it was quite certain that he never engaged in any military action. His function was that of telling Tennar what he wanted to hear; and of carrying his orders, unchanged, to others. On occasion, if it seemed safe, he might try to steer Tennar into more prudent courses.

Linn was well-known as "Tennar's lackey," and he knew that that was how he was known. It did not bother him. As lackey, he was safe, and he had seen the downfall of those who had been too proud to be lackeys.

The time might, of course, come when Tennar himself would be buried in the ever-changing junta panorama, but Linn felt, with a certain amount of philosophy, that he would be aware of it in time and save himself. —Or he might not. There was a price for everything.

"No reason why you can't found a dynasty, General," said Linn. "Many others have done it in the long Imperial history. Still, it takes time. The people are slow to adapt. It is usually only the second or even third of the dynasty who is fully accepted as Emperor."

"I don't believe that. I need merely announce myself as the new Emperor. Who will dare quarrel with that? My grip is tight."

"So it is, General. Your power is unquestioned on Trantor and in most of the Inner Worlds, yet it is possible that many in the farther Outer Worlds will not—just yet—accept a new Imperial dynasty."

"Inner Worlds or Outer Worlds, military force rules all. That is an old Imperial maxim."

"And a good one," said Linn, "but many of the Viceroys have armed forces of their own, nowadays, that they may not use on your behalf. These are difficult times."

"You counsel caution, then."

"I always counsel caution, General."

"And some day you may counsel it once too often."

Linn bent his head. "I can only counsel what seems to me to be good and useful to you, General."

"As in your harping to me about this Hari Seldon."

"He is your greatest danger, General."

"So you keep saying, but I don't see it. He's just a college professor."

Linn said, "So he is, but he was once First Minister."

"I know, but that was in Cleon's time. Has he done anything since? With times being difficult and with Viceroys being fractious, why is a professor my greatest danger?"

"It is sometimes a mistake," said Linn, carefully (for one had to be careful in educating the general) "to suppose that a quiet, unobtrusive man can be harmless. Seldon has been anything but harmless to those he has opposed. Eighteen years ago, there was the Joranumite movement that almost destroyed Cleon's powerful First Minister, Eto Demerzel."

Tennar nodded, but the slight frown on his face betrayed his effort to remember the matter.

"It was Seldon who destroyed Joranum, and who succeeded Demerzel as First Minister. The Joranumite movement survived, however, and Seldon engineered its destruction, too, but not before it succeeded in bringing about the assassination of Cleon."

"But Seldon survived that, didn't he?"

"You are perfectly correct. Seldon survived."

"That is strange. To have permitted an Imperial assassination ought to have meant death for a First Minister."

"So it ought. Nevertheless, the junta has allowed him to live. It seemed wiser to do so."

"Why?"

Linn sighed internally. "There is something called psychohistory, General."

"I know nothing about that," said Tennar, flatly.

Actually, he had a vague memory of Linn trying to talk to him on a number of occasions concerning this strange collection of syllables. He had never wanted to listen and Linn had known better than to push. Tennar didn't want to listen now, either, but there seemed to be a hidden urgency in Linn's words. Perhaps, Tennar thought, he had better pay attention now.

"Almost no one knows anything about it," said Linn, "Yet there are a few—uh—intellectuals, who find it of interest."

"And what is it?"

"It is a complex system of mathematics."

Tennar shook his head, "Leave me out of that, please. I can count my army divisions. That's all the mathematics I need."

"The story is," said Linn, "that psychohistory may make it possible to predict the future."

The general's eyes bulged. "You mean this Seldon is a fortune-teller?"

"Not after the usual fashion. It is a matter of science."

"I don't believe it."

"It is hard to believe, but Seldon has become something of a cult figure here on Trantor, and in certain places in the Outer Worlds. Now psychohistory, if it can be used to predict the future, or if even people merely think it can be so used, can be a powerful tool with which to uphold the regime. I'm sure you have already seen this, General. One need merely predict our regime will endure and bring forth peace and prosperity for the Empire. People, believing this, will help make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, if Seldon wishes the reverse, he can predict civil war and ruin. People will believe that, too, and that would destabilize the regime."

"In that case, Colonel, we simply make sure that the predictions of psychohistory are what we want them to be."

"It would be Seldon who would have to make them, and he is not a friend of the regime. It is important, General, that we differentiate between the Project that is working at Streeling University to perfect psychohistory and Hari Seldon. Psychohistory can be extremely useful to us, but it will be so only if someone other than Seldon were in charge."

"Are there others who could be?"

"Oh, yes. It is only necessary to get rid of Seldon."

"What is so difficult with that? An order of execution—and it is done."

"It would be better, General, if the government was not seen to be directly involved in such a thing."

"Explain!"

"I have arranged to have him meet with you, so that you can use your skill to probe his personality. You would then be able to judge whether certain suggestions I have in mind are worthwhile or not."

"When is the meeting to take place?

"It was to take place very soon, but his representatives at the Project asked for a few days leeway, because they were in the process of celebrating his birthday, his sixtieth apparently. It seemed wise to allow that, and to permit a week's delay."

"Why?" demanded Tennar. "I dislike any display of weakness."

"Quite right, General. Quite right. Your instincts are, as always, correct. However, it seemed to me that the needs of the state might require us to know what the birthday celebration—which is taking place right now—might involve."

"Why?"

"All knowledge is useful. Would you care to see some of the festivities?"

General Tennar's face remained dark. "Is that necessary?"

"I think you will find it interesting, General."

The reproduction, sight and sound, was excellent, and for quite a while, the hilarity of the birthday celebration filled the rather stark room in which the General sat.

Linn's low voice served as commentary. "Most of this, General, is taking place in the Project Community, but the rest of the university is involved. We will have an airview in a few moments, and you will see that the celebration covers a wide area. In fact, though I don't have the evidence available right now, there are corners of the planet here and there, in various university and foundation settings mostly, where what we might call sympathy-celebrations of one sort or another are taking place. The celebrations are still continuing and will endure for another day at least."

"Are you telling me that this is a Trantor-wide celebration?"

"In a specialized way. It affects mostly the intellectual classes, but it is surprisingly wide-spread. It may even be that there is some shouting on worlds other than Trantor."

"Where did you get this reproduction?"

Linn smiled. "Our facilities in the Project are quite good. We have reliable sources of information so that little can happen that doesn't come our way at once."

"Well, then, Linn, what are all your conclusions about this?"

"It seems to me, General, and I'm sure that it seems so to you, that Hari Seldon is the focus of a personality cult. He has so identified himself with psychohistory that if we were to get rid of him in too open a manner we would entirely destroy the credibility of the science. It would be useless to us.

"On the other hand, General, Seldon is growing old and it is not difficult to imagine him being replaced by another man, someone we could choose and who would be friendly to our great aims and hopes for the Empire. If Seldon could be removed in such a way that it is made to seem natural, then that is all we need."

The General thought. "And you think I ought to see him."

"Yes, in order to weigh his quality, and decide what we ought to do. But we must be cautious, for he is a popular man."

"I have dealt with popular people before," said Tennar, darkly.

13.

"Yes," said Hari Seldon, wearily, "it was a great triumph. I had a wonderful time. I can hardly wait for seventy so I can repeat it. But the fact is, I'm exhausted."

"So get yourself a good night's sleep, Dad," said Raych, smiling. "That's an easy cure."

"I don't know how well I can relax when I have to see our Great Leader in a few days."

"Not alone, you won't see him," said Dors Venabili, grimly.

Seldon frowned. "Don't say that again, Dors. It is important for me to see him alone."

"It won't be safe with you alone. Do you remember what happened ten years ago when you refused to let me come with you to greet the gardeners?"

"There is no danger of my forgetting when you remind me of it twice a week, Dors. In this case, though, I intend to go alone. What can he want to do to me, if I come in, an old man, utterly harmless, to find out what it is he wants?"

"What do you imagine he wants" said Raych, biting at his knuckle.

"I suppose he wants what Cleon always wanted. It will turn out that he has found out that psychohistory can, in some way, predict the future, and he will want to use it for his own purpose. I told Cleon the science wasn't up to it nearly thirty years ago, and I kept telling him that all through my tenure as First Minister—and now I'll have to tell General Tennar the same thing."

"How do you know he'll believe you?" said Raych.

"I'll think of some way of being convincing."

Dors said, "I do not wish you to go alone."

"Your wishing, Dors, makes no difference."

At this point, Tamwile Elar interrupted. He said, "I'm the only non-family person here. I don't know if a comment from me would be welcome."

"Go ahead," said Seldon. "Come one. Come all."

"I would like to suggest a compromise. Why don't a number of us go with the Maestro. Quite a few of us. We can act as his triumphal escort; a kind of appendix to the birthday celebration. —Now wait, I don't mean we will crowd into the General's offices. I don't even mean entering the Imperial Palace Grounds. We can just take hotel rooms in the Imperial Sector at the edge of the grounds. The Dome's Edge Hotel would be just right, and we'll give ourselves a day of pleasure."

"That's what I need," snorted Seldon. "A day of pleasure."

"Not you, Maestro," said Elar at once. "You can rest. The rest of us, though, will give the people of the Imperial Sector a notion of your popularity—and perhaps the General will take note also. And if he knows we're all waiting for your return, it may keep him from being unpleasant."

There was a considerable silence after that. Finally, Raych said, "It sounds unnecessarily demonstrative. It doesn't fit in with the picture the world has of Dad."

But Dors said, "I'm not interested in the picture. I'm interested in Hari's safety, and it strikes me that if we cannot invade the general's presence, or the Imperial Grounds, then allowing ourselves to accumulate, so to speak, as near the general as we can, might indeed do well. Thank you, Dr. Elar, for a very good notion."

"I don't want it done," said Seldon.

"But I do," said Dors, "and if that's as close as I can get to offering you personal protection, then that much I will insist on."

Manella, who had listened to it all without comment till then, said, "Visiting Dome's Edge Hotel could be a lot of fun."

"It's not fun I'm thinking of," said Dors, "but I'll accept your vote in favor."

And so it was. The following day, some twenty of the higher echelons of the Psychohistorical Project descended on the Dome's Edge Hotel, with rooms overlooking the open spaces of the Imperial Palace Grounds.

The evening following, Hari Seldon was picked up by armed guards and taken off to his meeting.

At almost the same time, Dors Venabili disappeared, but her absence was not noted for a long time. And when it was noted, no one could guess what had happened to her, and the gaily festive mood turned rapidly unhappily apprehensive.

14.

Venabili had lived in the Imperial Palace Grounds for ten years. As wife of the First Minister, she had entry to it and could pass freely from the dome to the open, with her fingerprints as the pass.

In the confusion that followed Cleon's assassination, her pass had never been removed and now when, for the first time since that dreadful day, she wanted to move from the dome into the open of the Grounds, she could do so.

She had always known that she could only do so easily once only, for, upon discovery, the pass would be canceled—but this was the one time to do it.

There was a sudden darkening of the sky as she moved into the open and a distinct lowering of the temperature. The world under the dome was always kept a little lighter during the night-period than natural night would require, and was kept a little dimmer during the day-period. And, of course, the temperature beneath the dome was always a bit milder than the outdoors.

Most Trantorians were unaware of this, for they spent their entire lives under the dome. To Dors it was expected, and it didn't matter.

She took the Central Path, into which the dome opened at the site of the Dome's Edge Hotel. It was, of course, brightly lit, so that the darkness of the sky didn't matter at all.

Dors knew that she would not advance a hundred meters along the road without being stopped; less perhaps in the present paranoid days of the junta. Her alien presence would be detected at once.

Nor was she disappointed. A small ground car skittered up and the guard shouted out the window, "Where are you going?"

She ignored the question and continued to walk.

The guard called out "Halt!", slammed on the brakes and stepped out of the car, which was what Venabili wanted him to do.

The guard was holding a blaster loosely in his hand—not threatening to use it, merely demonstrating its existence. He said, "Your identification."

Dors said, "I want your car."

"What!" The guard sounded outraged. "Your identification. Immediately!" And now the blaster came up.

Dors said, quietly, "You don't need my identification," and walked toward the guard.

The guard took a backward step. "If you don't stand and present identification, I will shoot you."

"No! Drop your blaster."

The guard's lips tightened. His finger on the blast-contact tightened as well, but before it could tighten all the way, he was lost.

He could never describe afterward what happened in any accurate way. All he could say was, "How did I know it was the Tiger Woman?" (The time came when he would be proud of the encounter.) "She moved so fast, I didn't see exactly what she did or what happened. One moment I was going to shoot her down—I was sure she was some sort of madwoman-fanatic—and the next I was completely overwhelmed."

Dors held the guard in a firm grip, the hand with the blaster forced high. She said, "Either drop the blaster at once or I will break your arm."

The guard felt a kind of deathgrip about his chest that all but prevented him from breathing. He had no choice, and dropped the blaster.

Venabili released him, but before the guard could make a move to recover, he found himself facing the blaster in the other's hand.

Dors said, "I hope you've left your car-contacts in place. Don't try to report what's happened too quickly. You had better wait and decide what it is you plan to tell your superiors. The fact that an unarmed woman took your blaster and your car may well put an end to your usefulness to the Guard."

Venabili started the car and began to speed down the Central Path. A ten-year stay on the grounds told her exactly where she was going. The car she was in, an official guard-car, was not an alien intrusion into the grounds and would not be picked up as a matter of course. However, she had to take a chance on speed, for she wanted to reach her destination rapidly. She pushed the car to a speed of two hundred kilometers per hour.

The speed, at least, did attract attention eventually. She ignored radioed cries, demanding to know why she was speeding and, before long, her own detectors told her that another ground-car was in hot pursuit.

She knew that there would be a warning sent up ahead and that there would be other cars waiting for her to arrive, but there was little any of them could do, short of trying to blast her out of existence, something, apparently, no one was willing to try pending further investigation.

When she reached the building she had been heading for, two groundcars were waiting for her. She climbed serenely out of her own car and walked toward the entrance.

Two men at once stood in her way, obviously astonished that the driver of the speeding car was not a guard but was a woman dressed in civilian clothes.

"What are you doing here? What was your hurry?"

Dors said, quietly, "Important message for Colonel Hender Linn."

"Is that so?" said the guard, harshly. There were now four men between her and the entrance. "Identification, please."

Dors said, "Don't delay me."

"I said, identification."

"You're wasting my time."

One of the guards said suddenly, "You know who she looks like. The old Minister's wife. Dr. Venabili. The Tiger Woman."

There was an odd backward step on the part of all four, but one of them said, "You're under arrest."

"Am I?" said Dors. "If I'm the Tiger Woman, you must know that I am considerably stronger than any of you; and that my reflexes are considerably faster. Let me suggest that all four of you accompany me quietly inside and we'll see what Colonel Linn has to say."

"You're under arrest," came the repetition, and four blasters were aimed at Dors.

"Well," said Dors. "If you insist."

She moved rapidly, and two of the guards were on the ground, groaning, while Dors was standing with a blaster in each hand.

She said, "I have tried not to hurt them, but it is quite possible that I have broken their wrists. That leaves two of you, and I can shoot faster than you can. If either of you makes the slightest move, the slightest, I will have to break the habit of a lifetime and kill you. It will sicken me to do so and I beg you not to force me into it."

There was absolute silence from the two guards still standing; no motion.

"I would suggest," said Dors, "that you two escort me into the Colonel's presence, and that you then seek medical help for your comrades."

The suggestion was not necessary. Colonel Linn emerged from his office. "What is going on here? What is—"

Dors turned to him. "Ah! Let me introduce myself. I am Dr. Dors Venabili, the wife of Professor Hari Seldon. I have come to see you on important business. These four tried to stop me and, as a result, two are badly hurt. Send them all about their business and let me talk to you. I mean you no harm."

Linn stared at the four guardsmen, then at Dors. He said, calmly, "You mean me no harm? Though four guardsmen have not succeeded in stopping you, I have four thousand at my instant call."

"Then call them," said Dors. "However quickly they come, it will not be in time to save you if I decide to kill you. Dismiss your guards and let us talk civilly."

Linn gestured at the guards. He said, "Well, come in, and we will talk. Let me warn you, though, Dr. Venabili—I have a long memory."

"And I," said Dors. They walked into Linn's quarters together.

15.

Linn said, with utmost courtesy, "Tell me exactly why you are here, Dr. Venabili."

Dors smiled without menace, and yet not exactly pleasantly either. "To begin with," she said, "I have come here to show you that I can come here."

"Ah?"

"Yes. My husband was taken to his interview with the General, in an official ground-car, under official escort. I, myself, left the Hotel at about the same time he did, on foot and unarmed—and here I am, and I believe I got here before he did. I had to wade through five guards in order to reach you. I would have waded through fifty."

Linn nodded his head, phlegmatically. "I understand that you are sometimes called The Tiger Woman."

"I have been called that. —Now, having reached you, my task is to make certain that no harm comes to my husband. He is venturing into the general's lair—if I can be dramatic about it—and I want him to emerge unharmed and unthreatened."

"As far as I am concerned, I know that no harm will come to your husband as a result of this meeting. But if you are concerned, why do you come to me? Why didn't you go directly to the general?"

"Because, of the two of you, it is you that has the brains."

There was a short pause and Linn said, "That would be a most dangerous remark—if overheard."

"More dangerous for you than for me, so make sure it is not overheard. —Now, if it occurs to you that I am to be simply soothed and put off and that, if my husband is imprisoned or marked for execution, that there will really be nothing I can do about it, disabuse yourself."

She indicated the two blasters that lay on the table before her. "I entered the grounds with nothing. I arrived in your immediate vicinity with two blasters. If I had no blasters, I might have had knives, with which I am an expert. And if I had neither blasters nor knives, I would still be a formidable person. This table we're sitting at is metal—obviously—and sturdy."

"It is."

Dors held up her hands, fingers splayed, as if to show that she held no weapon. Then she dropped them to the table and, palms down, caressed its surface.

Abruptly Dors raised her fist and then brought it down on the table with a loud crash, which sounded almost as if metal were striking metal. She smiled and lifted her hand.

"No bruise," Dors said. "No pain. But you'll notice that the table is slightly bent where I struck it. If that same blow had come down, with the same force, on a person's head, the skull would have exploded. I have never done such a thing; in fact, I have never killed anyone, though I have hurt some. Nevertheless, if Professor Seldon is harmed—"

"You are still threatening."

"I am promising. I will do nothing if Professor Seldon is unharmed. Otherwise, Colonel Linn, I will maim or kill you and, I promise you again, I will do the same to General Tennar."

Linn said, "You cannot withstand an entire army, no matter how tigerish a woman you are. What then?"

"Stories spread," said Dors, "and are exaggerated. I have not really done much in the way of tigerishness but many more stories are told of me than are true. Your guards fell back when they recognized me, and they themselves will spread the story, with advantage, of how I made my way to you. Even an army might hesitate to attack me, Colonel Linn, but even if they did and even if they destroyed me, beware the indignation of the people. The junta is maintaining order, but it is doing so only barely and you don't want anything to upset matters. Think, then, of how simple the alternative is. Simply do not harm Professor Hari Seldon."

"There is no intention of harming him."

"Why the interview, then?"

"Where is the mystery? The general is curious about psychohistory. The government records are open to us. The old Emperor Cleon was interested. Demerzel, when he was First Minister, was interested. Why should we not be in our turn? In fact, more so."

"Why more so?"

"Because time has passed. As I understand it, psychohistory began as a thought in Professor Seldon's mind. He has been working on it, with increasing vigor and with larger and larger groups of people, for nearly thirty years. He has done so almost entirely with government support, so that, in a way, his discoveries and techniques belong to the government. We intend to ask him about psychohistory, which, by now, must be far advanced beyond what existed in the times of Demerzel and Cleon, and we expect him to tell us what we want to know. We want something more practical than the vision of equations curling their way through air. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," said Dors, frowning.

"And one more thing. Do not suppose that the danger to your husband comes from the government only and that any harm that reaches him will mean that you must attack us at once. I would suggest that Professor Seldon may have purely private enemies. I have no knowledge of such things, but surely it is possible."

"I shall keep that in mind. Right now, I want to have you arrange that I join my husband during his interview with the general. I want to know, beyond doubt, that he is safe."

"That will be hard to arrange, and will take some time. It would be impossible to interrupt the conversation, but if you wait till it is ended—"

"Take the time and arrange it. Do not count on double-crossing me and remaining alive."

16.

General Tennar stared at Hari Seldon in a rather pop-eyed manner and his fingers tapped lightly at the desk he sat at.

"Thirty years," he said, "Thirty years, and you are telling me you still have nothing to show for it?"

"Actually, General, twenty-eight years."

Tennar ignored that. "And all at government expense. Do you know how many billions of Galacts have been invested in your Project, Professor?"

"I haven't kept up, General, but we have records that could give me the answer to your question in seconds."

"And so have we. The government, Professor, is not an endless source of money. These are not the old times. We don't even have Cleon's old free-and-easy attitude toward finances. Raising taxes is hard, and we need money for many things. I have called you here hoping that you can benefit us in some way with your psychohistory. If you cannot, then I must tell you, quite frankly, that we will have to close the faucet. If you can continue your research without government money, do so, for unless you show me something that would make the expense worth it, you will have to do just that."

"General, you make a demand I cannot meet, but, if in response, you end government support, you will be throwing away the future. Give me time and eventually—"

"Various governments have heard that 'eventually' from you for decades. Isn't it true, Professor, that you say your psychohistory predicts that the junta is unstable; that my rule is unstable; that in a short time it will collapse?"

Seldon frowned. "The technique is not yet firm enough for me to say that this is something that psychohistory states."

"I put it to you that psychohistory does state it, and that this is common knowledge within your Project."

"No," said Seldon, warmly, "No such thing. It is possible that some among us have interpreted some relationships to indicate that the junta may be an unstable form of government, but there are other relationships that may easily be interpreted to show it is stable. That is the reason why we must continue our work. At the present moment, it is all too easy to use incomplete data and imperfect reasoning to reach any conclusion we wish."

"But if you decide to present the conclusion that the government is unstable, and say that psychohistory warrants it, even if it does not actually do so, will it not add to the instability?"

"It might well do that, General. And if we announced that the government is stable, it may well add to the stability. I have had this very same discussion with the Emperor Cleon on a number of occasions. It is possible to use psychohistory as a tool to manipulate the emotions of the people and achieve short-term effects. In the long run, however, the predictions are quite likely to prove incomplete, or downright erroneous, and psychohistory will lose all its credibility and it will be as though it had never existed."

"Enough! Tell me straight out! What do you think psychohistory shows about my government?"

"It shows, we think, that there are elements of instability in it, but we are not certain, and cannot be certain, exactly in what way this can be made worse, or made better."

"In other words, psychohistory simply tells you what you would know without psychohistory, and it is that in which government has invested uncounted piles of money."

"The time will come when psychohistory will tell us what we could not know without it, and then the investment will pay itself back many, many times over."

"And how long will it be before that time comes?"

"Not too long, I hope. We have been making rather gratifying progress in the last few years."

Tennar was tapping his fingernail on his desk again. "Not enough. Tell me something helpful now. Something useful."

Seldon pondered, then said, "I can prepare a detailed report for you, but it will take time."

"Of course it will. Days, months, years, and somehow it will never be written. Do you take me for a fool?"

"No, of course not, General. However, I don't want to be taken for a fool, either. I can tell you something that I take sole responsibility for. I have seen it in my psychohistorical research but I may have misinterpreted what I saw. However, since you insist—"

"I insist."

"You mentioned taxes a little while ago. You said raising taxes was hard. Certainly. It is always hard. Every government must do its work by collecting money—wealth, in one form or another. The only two ways in which such money can be obtained are, first, by robbing a neighbor, or second, persuading a government's own citizens to grant the money willingly and peaceably.

"Since we have established a Galactic Empire that has been conducting its business in reasonable fashion for thousands of years, there is no possibility of robbing a neighbor except as the result of an occasional rebellion and its repression. This does not happen often enough to support a government; and, if it did, the government would be too unstable to last long, in any case."

Seldon drew a deep breath and went on. "Therefore money must be raised by asking the citizens to hand over part of their wealth for government use. Presumably, since the government will then work efficiently, the citizens can better spend their money in this way than to hoard it, each man to himself, while living in a dangerous and chaotic anarchy.

"However, though the request is reasonable, and the citizenry is better off paying taxes as their price for maintaining a stable and efficient government, they are nevertheless reluctant to do so. In order to overcome this reluctance, governments must make it appear that they are not taking too many credits, and that they are considering each citizen's rights and benefits. In other words, they must lower the percentage taken out of low incomes; they must allow deductions of various kinds to be made before the tax is assessed, and so on.

"As time goes on, the tax situation inevitably grows more and more complex as different worlds, different sectors within each world, different economic divisions all demand and require special treatment. The result is that the tax-collecting branch of the government grows in size and complexity and tends to become uncontrollable. The average citizen cannot understand why or how much he is being taxed; what he can get away with and what he can't. The government and the tax agency itself are often in the dark as well.

"What's more, an ever-larger fraction of the funds collected must be put into running the overelaborate tax agency—maintaining records, pursuing tax delinquents—so the amount of credits available for good and useful purposes declines despite anything we can do.

"In the end, the tax situation becomes overwhelming. It inspires discontent and rebellion. The history books tend to ascribe these things to greedy businessmen, to corrupt politicians, to brutal warriors, to ambitious viceroys—but these are just the individuals who take advantage of the tax overgrowth."

The General said harshly, "Are you telling me that our tax system is overcomplicated?"

Seldon said, "If it were not, it would be the only one in history that wasn't, as far as I know. If there is one thing that psychohistory tells me is inevitable, it is tax overgrowth."

"And what do we do about it?"

"That I cannot tell you. It is that for which I would like to prepare a report that—as you say—may take a while to get ready."

"Never mind the report. The tax system is over-complicated, isn't it? Isn't that what you are saying?"

"It is possible that it is," said Seldon, cautiously.

"And to correct that, one must make the tax system simpler, as simple as possible, in fact."

"I would have to study—"

"Nonsense. The opposite of great complication is great simplicity. It needs no report to tell me that."

"As you say, General," said Seldon.

At this point, the general looked up suddenly, as though he had been called, as, indeed, he had been. His fists clenched and, in the room, there appeared the holovision images of Colonel Linn and Dors Venabili.

Thunderstruck, Seldon exclaimed, "Dors! What are you doing here?"

The General said nothing, but his brow furrowed into a frown.

17.

The general had had a bad night and so, out of apprehension, had the colonel. They faced each other, now, each at a loss.

The general said, "Tell me again what this woman did."

Linn seemed to have a heavy weight on his shoulders. "She's the Tiger Woman. That's what they call her. She doesn't seem to be quite human, somehow. She's some sort of impossibly trained athlete, full of self-confidence and, General, she's quite frightening."

"Did she frighten you? A single woman?"

"Let me tell you exactly what she did, and let me tell you a few other things about her. I don't know how true all the stories about her are, but what happened yesterday evening is true enough."

He told the story again, and the General listened, puffing out his cheeks.

"Bad," he said, "What do we do?"

"I think our course is plain before us. We want psychohistory—"

"Yes, we do," said the General. "Seldon told me something about taxation that— but never mind. That is beside the point, at the moment. Go on."

Linn, who, in his troubled state of mind, had allowed a small fragment of impatience to show on his face, continued. "As I say, we want psychohistory without Seldon. He is, in any case, a used-up man. The more I study him, the more I see an elderly scholar living on his past deeds. He has had nearly thirty years to make a success of psychohistory and he has failed. Without him, with new men at the helm, psychohistory may advance more rapidly, in fact."

"Yes, I agree. Now what about the woman?"

"Well, there you are. We haven't taken her into consideration because she has been careful to remain in the background. But I strongly suspect now that it will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to remove Seldon quietly, and without implicating the government, as long as the woman remains alive."

"Do you really believe that she will mangle you and me, if she thinks we have harmed her man?" said the general, his mouth twisting in contempt.

"I really think she will, and that she will start a rebellion in addition. It will be exactly as she promised."

"You are turning coward."

"General, please. I am trying to be sensible. I'm not backing off. We must take care of this Venabili." He paused, thoughtfully, "As a matter of fact, my sources have told me this and I have paid the matter too little attention."

"And how do you think we can get rid of her?"

Linn said, "I don't know." Then, more slowly, "But someone else might."

18.

Seldon had had a bad night also, nor was the new day promising to be much better. There weren't many occasions on which he felt annoyed with Dors. This time, he was very annoyed.

He said, "What a foolish thing to do! Wasn't it enough that we were all at Dome's Edge Hotel? That alone would have been sufficient to drive a paranoid ruler into thoughts of some sort of conspiracy."

"How? We were unarmed, Hari. It was a holiday affair; the last touch of your birthday celebration. We posed no threat."

"Yes, but then you carried out your invasion of the Palace Grounds. It was unforgivable. You raced to the palace to interfere with my session with the general, when I had specifically, and several times, made it plain that I didn't want you there. I had my own plans, you know."

Dors said, "Your desires, and your orders, and your plans all take second place to your safety. I was concerned about your safety."

"I was in no danger."

"That is not something I can carelessly assume. There have been two attempts on your life. What makes you think there won't be a third?"

"The two attempts were made when I was First Minister. I was worth killing then. Who would want to kill an elderly mathematician?"

Dors said, "That's exactly what I want to find out, and it's what I want to stop. I must do some questioning right here at the Project."

"No. You will simply be upsetting my people. Leave them alone."

"That's exactly what I can't do. Hari, my job is to protect you, and for twenty-eight years I've been working at that. You cannot stop me now."

Something in the blaze of her eyes made it quite clear that whatever Seldon's desires or orders might be, she intended to do as she pleased.

Seldon's safety came first.

19.

"May I interrupt you, Yugo?"

"Of course, Dors," said Yugo Amaryl, with a large smile. "You are never an interruption. What can I do for you?"

"I am trying to find out a few things, Yugo, and I wonder if you would humor me in this."

"If I can."

"You have something on the Project called the Prime Radiant. I hear of it now and then. Hari speaks of it so I imagine I know what it looks like when it is activated, but I have never actually seen it in operation. I would like to."

Amaryl looked uncomfortable. "Actually, the Prime Radiant is just about the most closely guarded part of the Project, and you're not one of those on the list of users."

"I know that, but we've known each other for twenty-eight years—"

"And you're Hari's wife. I suppose we can stretch a point. We only have two full Prime Radiants. There's one in Hari's office, and one here. Right there, in fact."

Dors looked at the squat, black cylinder on the central desk. It looked utterly undistinguished. "Is that it?"

"That's it. It stores the equations that describe the future."

"How do you get at those equations?"

Amaryl moved a contact and at once the room darkened, and then came to life in a variegated glow. All about Dors were symbols, arrows, lines, mathematical signs of one sort or another. They seemed to be moving, spiraling, but when she focused her eyes on any particular portion, it seemed to be standing still.

She said, "Is that the future, then?"

"It may be," said Amaryl, turning off the instrument. "I had it at full expansion so you could see the symbols. Without expansion, nothing is visible but patterns of light and dark."

"And by studying those equations, you are able to judge what the future holds in store for us?"

"In theory." The room was now back to its mundane appearance, "But there are two difficulties."

"Oh? What are they?"

"To begin with, no human mind has created those equations directly. We have merely spent decades programming ever more powerful computers and they have devised and stored the equations, but, of course, we don't know if they are valid and have meaning. It depends entirely on how valid and meaningful the programming is in the first place."

"They could be all wrong, then?"

"They could be," Amaryl rubbed his eyes, and Dors could not help thinking how old and tired he seemed to have grown in the last couple of years. He was younger than Hari by a dozen years, yet he seemed older.

"Of course," Amaryl went on, in a rather weary voice, "we hope that they aren't all wrong, but that's where the second difficulty comes in. Although Hari and I have been testing and modifying them for decades, we can never be sure what the equations mean. The computer has constructed them, so it is to be presumed they mean something, but what? There are portions that we think we have worked out. In fact, right now, I'm working on what we call Section A-23, a particularly knotty system of relationships. We have not yet been able to match it with anything in the real universe. Still, each year sees us farther advanced, and I look forward confidently to the establishment of psychohistory as a legitimate and useful technique for dealing with the future."

"How many people have access to these Prime Radiants?"

"Every mathematician in the Project has access, but not at will. There have to be applications and time allotted and the Radiant has to be adjusted to the portion of the equations a mathematician wishes to refer to. It gets a little complicated when everyone wants to use the Radiant at the same time. Right now, things are slow, possibly because we're still in the aftermath of the birthday celebration."

"Is there any plan for constructing additional Prime Radiants?"

Amaryl thrust out his lips. "Yes and no. It would be very helpful if we had a third, but someone would have to be in charge of it. It can't just be a community possession. I have suggested to Hari that Tamwile Elar—you know him, I think—"

"Yes, I do."

"That Elar have a third Prime Radiant. His achaotic equations and the Electro-Clarifier he devised make him clearly the third man in the project after Hari and myself. Hari hesitates, however."

"Why? Do you know?"

"If Elar gets one, he is openly recognized as third man, over the heads of other mathematicians who are older and who have more senior status in the Project. There might be some political difficulties, so to speak. I think that we can't waste time in worrying about internal politics, but Hari— Well, you know Hari."

"Yes, I know Hari. Suppose I tell you that Linn has seen the Prime Radiant."

"Linn?"

"Colonel Hender Linn of the junta. Tennar's lackey."

"I doubt that very much, Dors."

"I heard him speak of spiraling equations, and I have just seen them produced by the Prime Radiant. I can't help but think he's been here and seen it working."

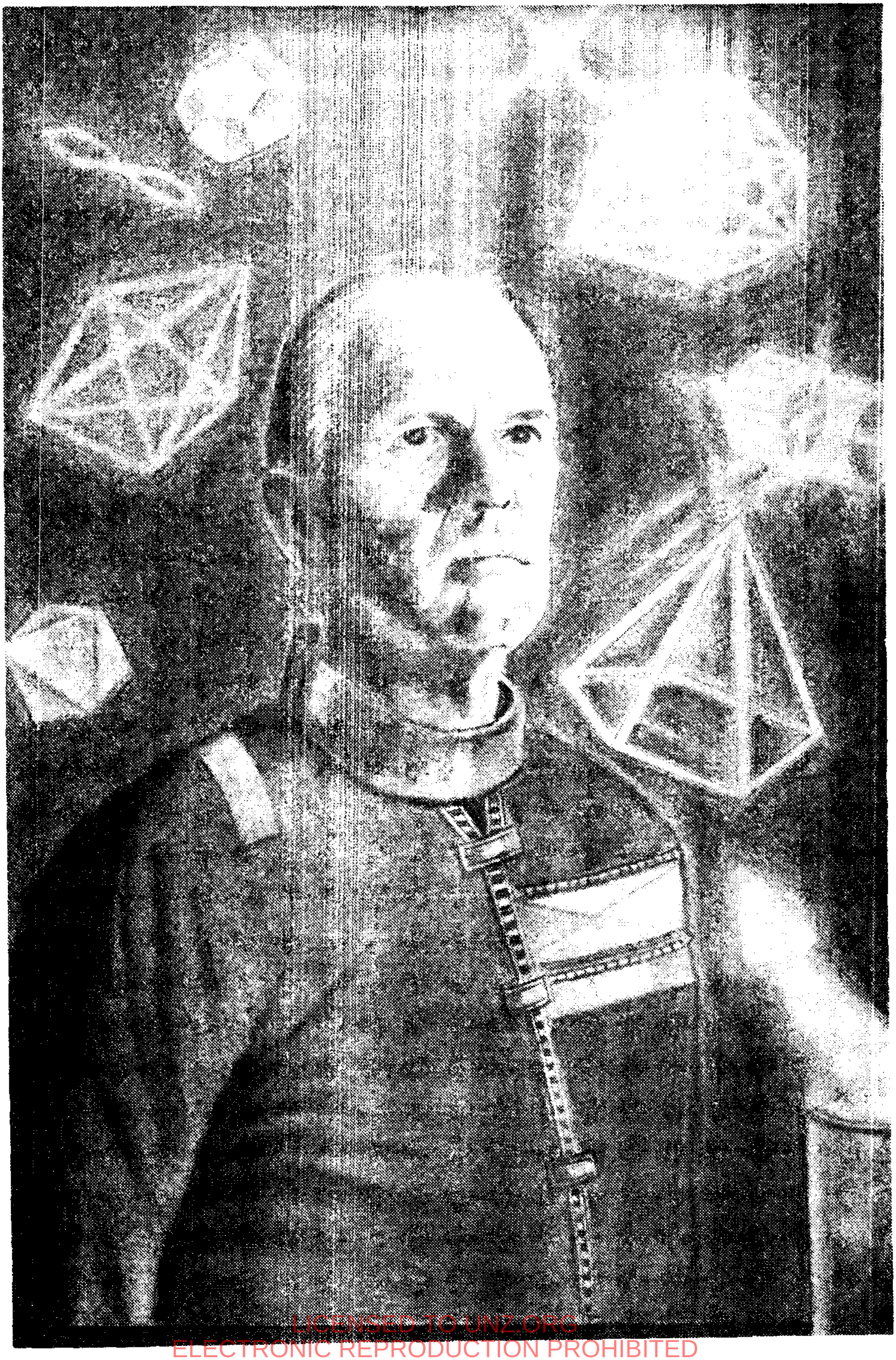
Amaryl shook his head, "I can't imagine anyone bringing a member of the junta into Hari's office, or mine."

"Tell me, who in the Project do you think is capable of working with the junta in this fashion?"

"No one," said Amaryl, flatly, and with clearly unlimited faith. "That would be unthinkable. Perhaps Linn never saw the Prime Radiant, but was merely told about it."

"Who would merely tell him about it?"

Amaryl thought a moment and said, "No one."



"Well, now, you talked about internal politics a while ago in connection with the possibility of Elar having a third Prime Radiant. I suppose in a Project such as this one with hundreds of people, there are little feuds going on all the time—frictions—quarrels."

"Oh, yes. Poor Hari talks to me about it every once in a while. He has to deal with them in one way or another, and I can well imagine what a headache it must be for him."

"Are these feuds so bad that they interfere with the working of the Project?"

"Not seriously."

"Are there any people who are more quarrelsome than others, or any who draw more resentment than others? In short, are there people you can get rid of and, perhaps, remove 90 percent of the friction at the cost of 5 or 6 percent of the personnel?"

Amaryl raised his eyebrows. "It sounds like a good idea, but I don't know whom to get rid of. I don't really participate in all the minutiae of internal politics. There's no way of stopping it, so for my part, I merely avoid it."

"That's strange," said Dors. "Aren't you in this way denying any credibility to psychohistory?"

"In what way?"

"How can you pretend to reach a point where you can predict and guide the future, when you cannot analyze and correct something as homegrown as personal frictions in the very Project that promises so much?"

Amaryl chuckled softly. It was unusual, for he was not a man given to humor and laughter. "I'm sorry, Dors, but you picked on the one problem that we have solved, after a manner of speaking. Hari, himself, identified the equations that represented the difficulties of personal friction years ago, and I, myself, then added the final touch last year.

"I found that there were ways in which the equations could be changed so as to indicate a reduction in friction. In every such case, however, a reduction in friction here, meant an increase in friction there. Never at any time was there a total decrease, or, for that matter, a total increase in the friction within a closed group—that is, one in which no old members leave and no new members come in. What I proved, with the help of Elar's achaotic equations, was that this was true despite any conceivable action anyone could take. Hari calls it 'the law of conservation of personal problems.'

"It gave rise to the notion that social dynamics has its conservation laws as physics does and that, in fact, it is these laws which offer us the best possible tools for solving the truly troublesome aspects of psychohistory."

Dors said, "Rather impressive, but what if you end up finding that nothing at all can be changed; that everything that is bad is conserved and that to save the Empire from destruction is merely to increase destruction of another kind?"

"Actually, some have suggested that, but I don't believe it."

"Very well. Back to reality. Is there anything in the frictional problems within the Project that threatens Hari? I mean, with physical harm."

"Harm Hari? Of course not. How can you suggest such a thing?"

"Might there not be some who resent Hari, for being too arrogant, too pushy, too self-absorbed, too eager to grab all the credit? Or, if none of these things apply, might they not resent him simply because he has run the Project for so long a time?"

"I never heard anyone say such a thing about Hari."

Dors seemed dissatisfied. "I doubt that anyone would say such things in your hearing, of course. But thank you, Yugo, for being so helpful, and for giving me so much of your time."

Amaryl stared after her as she left. He felt vaguely troubled, but then returned to his work and let other matters drift away.

20.

One way Hari Seldon had (out of not too many ways) for pulling away from his work for a time was to visit Raych's apartment just outside the university grounds. To do this invariably filled him with love for the younger man. There were ample grounds. Raych had been a good, a capable, and a loyal son—but beside that was that strange quality he had of inspiring trust and love.

Hari had observed it when Raych was a twelve-year-old street boy, who somehow pulled at Dors' and his own heartstrings. He remembered how Raych had affected Rashelle, the one-time Mayor of Wye. He remembered how Joranum had trusted him to his own destruction. Raych had even managed to win for himself the beautiful Manella. Hari did not completely understand this, but he enjoyed whatever contact he had with Raych.

He entered the apartment with his usual, "All well here?"

Raych put aside the holographic material he was working with and rose to greet him, "All well, dad."

"I don't hear Wanda."

"For good reason. She's out shopping with her mother."

Seldon seated himself and looked good-humoredly at the chaos of reference material. "How's the book coming?"

"It's doing fine. It's me who might not survive." He sighed. "But for once, we'll get the straight poop on Dahl. Nobody's ever written a book devoted to that Section, wouldja believe?"

Seldon had always noted that whenever Raych talked of his home-sector, his Dahlite accent always strengthened.

Raych said, "And how are you, Dad? Glad the festivities are over?"

"Enormously. I hated every minute of it."

"Not so anyone could notice."

"Listen, I had to wear the mask. I couldn't spoil it for other people."

"You must have hated it when Mom chased after you onto the Palace Grounds. Everyone's been talking about that."

"I certainly did hate it. Your mother, Raych, is the most wonderful person in the world, but she is very difficult to handle. She might have spoiled my plans."

"What plans are those, Dad?"

Seldon settled back. It was always pleasant to speak to someone in whom he had total trust and who knew nothing about psychohistory. More than once he had bounced thoughts off Raych and worked them out into more sensible form than would have been the case if those same thoughts had been mulled over in his mind. He said, "Are we shielded?"

"Always."

"Good. What I did was to set General Tennar thinking along curious lines."

"What lines?"

"Well, I discussed taxation a bit, and pointed out that in the effort to make taxation rest evenly on the population, it grew more and more complex, unwieldly, and costly. The obvious implication was that the taxsystem must be simplified."

"That seems to make sense."

"Up to a point, but it is possible that, as a result of our little discussion, Tennar may over-simplify. You see, taxation loses effectiveness at both extremes. Over-complicate it and people cannot understand it and pay for an overgrown and expensive tax organization. Over-simplify it, and people consider it unfair and grow bitterly resentful. The simplest tax is a poll tax in which every individual pays the same amount, but the unfairness of treating rich and poor alike in this way is too evident to overlook."

"And you didn't explain this to the General."

"Somehow I didn't get a chance."

"Do you think the General will try a poll tax?"

"I think he will plan one, and if he does, the news is bound to leak out, and that alone would suffice to set off riots, and possibly upset the government."

"And you've done this on purpose, Dad?"

"Of course."

Raych shook his head. "I don't quite understand you, Dad. In your personal life, you're as sweet and gentle as any person in the Empire. Under conditions where almost anyone would explode in fury, you cluck your tongue."

"You make me sound like a dry stick."

"No, I don't. I make you sound like a good man. Yet you can deliberately set up a situation in which there will be riots, repression, deaths. There'll be a lot of damage done, Dad. Have you thought of that?"

Seldon leaned back in his chair and said, sadly, "I think of nothing else, Raych. When I first began my work on psychohistory, it seemed a purely academic piece of research to me. It was something that could not be worked out at all, in all likelihood, and, if it was, it would not be something that could be practically applied. But the decades pass, and we know more and more, and there comes the terrible urge to apply it."

"So that people can die?"

"No, so that fewer people can die. If our psychohistorical analyses are correct now, then the junta cannot survive for more than a few years and there are various alternative ways in which it can collapse. They will all be fairly bloody and desperate. This method—the taxation gimmick—should do it more smoothly and gently than any other, if, I repeat, our analyses are correct."

"If they're not correct, what then?"

"In that case, we don't know what might happen. Still, psychohistory must reach the point where it can be used, and we've been searching for years for something in which we have worked out the consequences with a certain assuredness, and can find those consequences tolerable as compared with alternatives. In a way, this taxation gimmick is the first great psychohistoric experiment."

"I must admit it sounds like a simple one."

"It isn't. You have no idea how complex psychohistory is. Nothing is simple. The poll tax has been tried now and then throughout history. It is never popular and it invariably gives rise to resistance of one form or another, but it almost never results in the violent overthrow of a government. After all, the powers of governmental oppression may be too strong, or there may be methods whereby the people can bring to bear their opposition in a peaceful manner and achieve redress. If a poll tax were invariably or even just sometimes fatal, then no government would ever try it. It is only because it isn't fatal that it is tried repeatedly. The situation on Trantor is, however, not exactly normal. There are certain instabilities that seem clear in psychohistorical analysis which make it seem that resentment will be particularly strong and repression particularly weak."

Raych sounded dubious. "I hope it works, Dad, but don't you think that the General will say that he was working under psychohistorical advice and bring you down with him?"

"I suppose he recorded our little session together, but if he publicizes that, it will show clearly that I urged him to wait till I could analyze the situation properly and prepare a report—and he refused to wait."

"And what does Mom think of all this?"

Seldon said, "I haven't discussed it with her. She's off on another tangent altogether."

"Really?"

"Yes. She's trying to sniff out some deep conspiracy in the Project—aimed at me! I imagine she thinks there are many people in the Project who would like to get rid of me." Seldon sighed. "I'm one of them, I think. I would like to get rid of me as Director of the Project and leave the gathering responsibilities of psychohistory to others."

Raych said, "What's bugging Mom is Wanda's dream. You know how

Mom feels about protecting you. I'll bet even a dream about your dying would be enough to make her think of a murder conspiracy against you."

"I certainly hope there isn't one."

And at the idea of it, both men laughed.

21.

The small Electro-Clarification Laboratory was, for some reason, maintained at a temperature somewhat lower than normal, and Dors Venabili wondered idly why that might be. She sat quietly, waiting for the one occupant of the lab to finish whatever it was she was doing.

Venabili eyed the woman carefully. Slim, with a long face. Not exactly attractive, with her thin lips and receding jawline, but a look of intelligence shone in her dark brown eyes. The glowing nameplate on her desk said, "Cinda Monay."

She turned to Dors at last and said, "My apologies, Dr. Venabili, but there are some procedures that can't be interrupted even for the wife of the Director."

"I would have been disappointed in you if you had neglected the procedure on my behalf. I have been told excellent things about you."

"That's always nice to hear. Who's been praising me?"

"Quite a few," said Dors. "I gather that you are one of the most prominent non-mathematicians in the Project."

Monay winced. "There's a certain tendency to divide the rest of us from the aristocracy of mathematics. My own feeling is that if I'm prominent then I'm a prominent member of the Project. It makes no difference that I'm a non-mathematician."

"That certainly sounds reasonable to me. —How long have you been with the Project?"

"Two and a half years. Before that, I was a graduate student in radiational physics at Streeling and, while I was doing that, I served a couple of years with the Project as an intern."

"You've done well at the Project, I understand."

"I've been promoted twice, Dr. Venabili."

"Have you encountered any difficulties here, Dr. Monay? —What you say will be held confidential."

"The work is difficult, of course, but if you mean have I run into any social difficulties, the answer is, no. At least not any more than one would expect in any large and complex project, I imagine."

"And by that you mean?"

"Occasional spats and quarrels. We're all human."

"But nothing serious?"

Monay shook her head. "Nothing serious."

"My understanding, Dr. Monay," said Dors, "is that you have been responsible for the development of a device important to the use of the

Prime Radiant. It makes it possible to cram much more information into it."

Monay broke into a radiant smile. "Do you know about that? —Yes, the Electro-Clarifier. After that was developed, Director Seldon established this small laboratory and put me in charge of other work in that direction."

"I'm amazed that such an important advance did not bring you up into the higher echelons of the Project."

"Oh, well," said Monay, looking a trifle embarrassed. "I don't want to take all the credit. Actually, my work was only that of a technician, a very skilled and creative technician I like to think—but there you are."

"And who worked with you?"

"Didn't you know? It was Tamwile Elar. He worked out the theory that made the device possible and I designed and built the actual instrument."

"Does that mean he took the credit, Dr. Monay?"

"No, no. You mustn't think that. Dr. Elar is not that kind of man. He gave me full credit for my share of the work. In fact, it was his idea to call the device by our names, both our names, but he couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, that's Director Seldon's rule, you know. All devices and equations are to be given functional names and not personal ones, to avoid resentment. So the device is just the Electro-Clarifier. When we're working together, however, he gives the device our names and, I tell you, Dr. Venabili, it sounds grand. Perhaps some day, all will use the personal name. I hope so."

"I hope so, too," said Dors, politely. "You make Elar sound like a very decent individual."

"He is. He is," said Monay earnestly. "He is a delight to work for. Right now I'm working on a new version of the device, which is more powerful, and which I don't quite understand. —I mean, what it's to be used for. However, he's directing me there."

"And are you making progress?"

"Indeed. In fact, I've given Dr. Elar a prototype, which he plans to test. If it works out, we can proceed further."

"It sounds well," agreed Dors. "What do you think would happen if Professor Seldon were to resign the Directorship? If he were to retire?"

Monay looked surprised. "Is the Director planning to retire?"

"Not that I know of. I'm presenting you with a hypothetical case. Suppose he retires. Who do you think would be a natural successor? I think from what you have said you would favor Professor Elar as the new Director."

"Yes, I would," responded Monay, after a trifling hesitation. "He's far and away the most brilliant of the new people and I think he could run the Project in the best possible way. Still, he's rather young. There are a considerable number of old fossils—well, you know what I mean—who would resent being passed over by a young squirt."

"Is there any old fossil you're thinking of in particular? Remember this is confidential."

"Quite a few of them, but there's Dr. Amaryl. He's the Crown Prince. He's the Heir Apparent."

"Yes, I see what you mean." Dors rose. "Well, *thank* you *so much* for your help. I'll let you return to your labors now."

She left, thinking about the Electro-Clarifier. And about Amaryl.

22.

Yugo Amaryl said, "Here you are again, Dors."

"Sorry, Yugo. I'm bothering you twice this week. Actually, you don't see anyone very often, do you?"

Amaryl said, "I don't encourage people to visit me, no. They tend to interrupt me and break my line of thought. —Not you, Dors. You're altogether special, you and Hari. There's never a day I don't remember what you two have done for me."

Dors waved her hand. "Forget it, Yugo. You've worked hard for Hari and any trifling kindness we did you has long been overpaid. How is the Project going? Hari never talks about it—not to me, anyway."

Amaryl's face lightened and his whole body seemed to take on an infusion of life. "Very well. Very well. It's difficult to talk about it without mathematics, but it's amazing the progress we've made in the last two years; more than in all the time before that. It's as though, after we've been hammering away and hammering away, things have finally begun to break loose."

"I've been hearing that the new equations worked out by Dr. Elar have helped the situation."

"The achaotic equations? Yes. Enormously."

"And the Electro-Clarifier has been helpful, too. I spoke to the woman who designed it."

"Cinda Monay?"

"Yes. That's the one."

"A very clever woman. We're fortunate to have her."

"Tell me, Yugo—you work at the Prime Radiant virtually all the time, don't you?"

"I'm more or less constantly studying it. Yes."

"And you study it with the Electro-Clarifier attachment."

"Certainly."

"Don't you ever think of a vacation, Amaryl?"

Amaryl looked at her owlishly, blinking slowly, "A vacation?"

"Yes. Surely you've heard the word. You know what a vacation is."

"Why should I take a vacation?"

"Because you seem dreadfully tired to me."

"A little now and then. But I don't want to leave the work."

"Do you feel more tired now than you used to?"

"A little. I'm getting older, Dors."

"You're only forty-nine."

"That's still older than I've ever been before."

"Well, let it go. Tell me, Yugo—just to change the subject. How is Hari doing at his work? You've been with him so long that no one could possibly know him better than you do. Not even I. At least, as far as his work is concerned."

"He's doing very well, Dors. I see no change in him. He still has the quickest and brightest brain in the place. Age is having no effect on him; at least, not so far."

"That's good to hear. I'm afraid that his own opinion of himself is not as high as yours is. He's not taking his age well. We had a difficult time getting him to celebrate his recent birthday. Were you at the festivities, by the way? I didn't see you."

"I attended part of the time. But, you know, parties of that kind are not the sort of thing I feel at home with."

"Do you think Hari is wearing out? I'm not referring to his mental brilliance. I'm referring to his physical capacities. In your opinion, is he growing tired—too tired to bear up under his responsibilities?"

Amaryl looked astonished. "I never gave it any thought. I can't imagine him growing tired."

"He may be, just the same. I think he has the impulse, now and then, to give up his post and hand the task over to some younger man."

Amaryl sat back in his chair and put down the graphic-stylus he had been fiddling with ever since Dors had entered. "What! That's ridiculous! Impossible!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. He certainly wouldn't have such a thing under consideration without discussing it with me. And he hasn't."

"Be reasonable, Yugo. Hari is exhausted. He tries not to show it, but he is. What if he does decide to retire? What would become of the Project? What would become of psychohistory?"

Amaryl's eyes narrowed. "Are you joking, Dors?"

"No. I'm just trying to look into the future."

"Surely, if Hari retires, I succeed to the post. He and I ran the Project for years before anyone else joined us. He and I. No one else. Except for him, no one knows the Project as I do. I'm amazed you don't take my succession for granted, Dors."

Dors said, "There's no question in my mind or in anyone else's that you are the logical successor, but do you want to be? You may know everything about psychohistory, but do you want to throw yourself into the politics and complexities of a large Project and abandon much of your work in order to do so? Actually, it's trying to keep everything moving smoothly that's been wearing Hari down. Can you take on that part of the job?"

"Yes, I can, and it's not something I intend to discuss. —Look here, Dors. Did you come here to break the news that Hari intends to ease me out?"

Dors said, "Certainly not! How could you think it of Hari! Have you ever known him to turn on a friend?"

"Very well, then. Let's drop the subject." Abruptly, he turned away from her, and bent over his work once more. "Really, Dors, if you don't mind, there are things I must do."

"Of course. I didn't mean to take up this much of your time."

Dors left, frowning.

23.

Raych said, "Come in, Mom. The coast is clear. I've sent Manella and Wanda off somewhere."

Dors entered, looked right and left out of sheer habit, and sat down in the nearest chair.

"Thanks," said Dors. For a while she simply sat there looking as if the weight of the Empire were on her shoulders.

Raych waited, then said, "I never got a chance to ask you about your wild trip into the Palace Grounds. It isn't every guy who has a mom who can do that."

"We're not talking about that, Raych."

"Well then, tell me— You're not one for giving anything away by facial expressions, but you look sorta down. Why is that?"

"Because I feel, as you say, sorta down. In fact, I'm in a bad mood because I have terribly important things in hand and there's no use talking to your father about it. He's the most wonderful man in the world, but he's very hard to handle. There's no chance that he'd take an interest in the dramatic. He dismisses it all as irrational fears for his life—and my subsequent attempts to protect him."

"Come on, Mom, you do seem to have irrational fears where Dad's concerned. If you've got something dramatic in mind, it's probably all wrong."

"Thank you. You sound just like he does, and you leave me frustrated. Absolutely frustrated."

"Well, then, unburden yourself, Mom. Tell me what's on your mind. From the beginning."

"It starts with Wanda's dream."

"Wanda's dream! Mom! Maybe you'd better stop right now. I can see Dad not wanting to listen if you start that way. I mean, come on. A little kid has a dream and you make a big deal of it. That's ridiculous."

"I don't think it was a dream, Raych. I think what she *thought* was a dream were two real people, talking about what she thought concerned the death of her grandfather."

"That's a wild guess on your part. What possible chance does this have of being true?"

"Just suppose it is true. The one phrase that remained with her was 'lemonade death.' Why should she dream that? It's much more likely that she heard that and distorted the words she heard—in which case what were the undistorted words?"

"I can't tell you," said Raych, his voice dripping incredulity.

Dors did not fail to catch that. "You think this is just my sick invention. Still, if I happen to be right, I might be at the start of unravelling a conspiracy against Hari right here in the Project."

"Are there conspiracies in the Project? That sounds to me as impossible as finding significance in a dream."

"Every large project is riddled with angers, frictions, jealousies of all sorts."

"Sure. Sure. We're talking nasty words and faces and nose-thumbing and tale-bearing. That's nothing at all like talking conspiracy. It's not talking about killing Dad."

"It's just a difference in degree. A small difference, maybe."

"You'll never make Dad believe that. For that matter, you'll never make me believe that." Raych walked hastily across the room and back again, "And you've been trying to nose out this so-called conspiracy, have you?"

Dors nodded.

"And you've failed."

Dors nodded.

"Doesn't it occur to you that you've failed because there is no conspiracy, Mom?"

Dors shook her head. "I've failed so far, but that doesn't shake my belief that one exists. I have that feeling."

Raych laughed. "You sound very ordinary, Mom. I would expect more from you than 'I have that feeling.' "

"There is one phrase that I think can be distorted into 'lemonade.' That's 'layman-aided.' "

"Laymanayded? What's that?"

"Layman-aided. Two words. A layman is what the mathematicians at the Project call non-mathematicians."

"Well?"

"Suppose," interjected Dors, firmly, "someone spoke of 'layman-aided death,' meaning that some way could be found to kill Hari in which one or more non-mathematicians would play an essential role. Might that not have sounded to Wanda like 'lemonade death'? Especially considering that she had never heard the phrase 'layman-aided' any more than you had, but that she was extraordinarily fond of lemonade?"

"Are you trying to tell me that there were people in Dad's private office, of all places—how many people, by the way?"

"Wanda, in describing her dream, says two. My own feeling is that one of the two was none other than Colonel Hender Linn of the junta and that he was being shown the Prime Radiant and that there must have been a discussion involving the elimination of Hari."

"You're getting wilder and wilder, Mom. Colonel Linn and another man in Dad's office talking murder, and not knowing that there was a little girl hidden in a chair overhearing them? Is that it?"

"More or less."

"In that case, if there is mention of laymen, then one of the people, presumably the one that isn't Linn, must be a mathematician."

"It would seem to be so."

"That seems utterly impossible. But even if it were true, which mathematician do you suppose might be in question? We have some fifty in the Project."

"I haven't questioned them all. I've questioned a few and some laymen, too, for that matter, but I have uncovered no leads. Of course, I can't be too open in my questions."

"In short, no one you have interviewed has given you any lead on any dangerous conspiracy."

"No."

"I'm not surprised. They haven't done so, because—"

"I know your 'because,' Raych. Do you suppose people are going to break down and give away conspiracies under mild questioning? I am in no position to try to beat it out of anyone. Can you imagine what your father would say if I upset one of his precious mathematicians?"

Then, with a sudden change in the intonation of her voice, she said, "Raych, have you talked to Yugo Amaryl lately?"

"Not very lately. He's not one of your sociable creatures, you know. If you pulled the psychohistory out of him, he'd collapse into a little pile of dry skin."

Venabili made a face at the picture and said, "I've talked to him twice recently and he seems to me to be a little withdrawn. I don't mean just tired. It is almost as though he's not aware of the world."

"Yes. That's Yugo."

"Is he getting worse lately?"

Raych thought a while. "He might be. He's getting older, you know. We all are. —Except you, Mom."

"Would you say that Yugo had crossed the line and become a little unstable, Raych?"

"Who? Yugo? He has nothing to be unstable about. Or with. Just leave him at his psychohistory, and he'll mumble quietly to himself for the rest of his life."

"I don't think so. There is something that interests him—and very strongly, too. That's the succession."

"What succession?"

"I mentioned that someday your father might want to retire and it turns out that Yugo is determined, absolutely determined, to be his successor."

"I'm not surprised. I imagine everyone agrees that he is the natural successor. I'm sure Dad thinks so, too."

"But he seemed to me to be not quite normal about it. He thought I was coming to him to break the news that Hari had shoved him aside in favor of someone else. Can you imagine anyone thinking that of Hari?"

"It is surprising—" Raych interrupted himself and favored his mother with a long look. He said, "Mom, are you getting ready to tell me that it might be Yugo who's at the heart of this conspiracy you're speaking of? That he wants to get rid of Dad and take over?"

"Is that entirely impossible?"

"Yes, it is, Mom. Entirely. If there's anything wrong with Yugo, it's overwork and nothing else. Staring at all those equations or whatever they are, all day and half the night, would drive anyone crazy."

Dors rose to her feet with a jerk. "You're right."

Raych, startled, said, "What's the matter?"

"What you've said. It's given me an entirely new idea. A crucial one, I think." Turning, without another word, she left.

24.

Dors Venabili disapproved, as she said to Hari Seldon, "You've been four days at the Imperial Library. Completely out of touch and again you managed to go without me."

Husband and wife stared at each other's image on their holoscreens. Hari had just returned from a research trip to what was still called the "Imperial" Sector (despite the decidedly un-Imperial bent of the ruling junta); he was calling Dors from his Project office to let her know he'd returned to Streeling. Even in anger, thought Hari, Dors is beautiful, and he wished he could reach out and touch her cheek.

"Dors," he began, a placating note in his voice, "I did not go alone. I had a number of people with me and the Imperial Library, of all places, is safe for scholars even in these turbulent times. I am going to have to be at the Library more and more often, I think, as time goes on."

"And you're going to continue to do it without telling me?"

"Dors, I can't live according to these death-filled views of yours. Nor do I want you running after me and upsetting the librarians. They're not the junta. I need them and I don't want to make them angry."

Dors looked grim, shook her head, and changed the subject. "Do you know that I had two talks with Yugo recently?"

"Good. I'm glad you did. He needs contact with the outside world."

"Yes, he does, because something's wrong with him. He's not the Yugo we've had with us all these years. He's become vague, distant, and, oddly enough, passionate on only one point as nearly as I can tell—his determination to succeed you on your retirement."

"That would be natural, if he survives me."

"Don't you expect him to survive you?"

"Well, he's eleven years younger than I am, but the vicissitudes of circumstance—"

"What you really mean is that you recognize that Yugo is in a bad way. He looks and acts older than you do, for all his younger age, and that seems to be a rather recent development. Is he ill?"

"Physically? I don't think so. He has his periodic examinations. I'll admit, though, that he seems worn out. I've tried to persuade him to take a vacation for a few months; a whole year's sabbatical, if he wishes. I've suggested he leave Trantor altogether, just so that he be as far away from the Project as possible. There would be no problem in financing his stay in Getorin—which is a pleasant resort world not too many light-years away."

Dors shook her head, impatiently, "And, of course, he won't. I suggested a vacation to him and he acted as though he didn't know the meaning of the word. He refused categorically."

"So what can we do?" said Seldon.

Dors said, "We can think a little. Yugo worked a quarter of a century on the Project and seemed to maintain his strength without any trouble at all, and now suddenly he has weakened. It can't be age. He's not yet fifty."

"Are you suggesting something?"

"Yes. How long have you and Yugo been using this Electro-Clarifier thing on your Prime Radiants?"

"About two years—maybe a little more."

"I presume that the Electro-Clarifier is used by anyone who uses the Prime Radiant."

"That's right."

"Which means Yugo and you, mostly."

"Yes."

"And Yugo more than you."

"Yes. Yugo concentrates fiercely on the Prime Radiant and its equations. I, unfortunately, have to spend much of my time on administrative duties."

"And what effect does the Electro-Clarifier have on the human body?"

Seldon looked surprised. "Nothing of any significance that I am aware of."

"In that case, explain something to me, Hari. The Electro-Clarifier has been in operation for over two years and in that time you've grown measurably more tired, crotchety, and a little—out of touch. Why is that?"

"I'm getting older, Dors."

"Nonsense. Whoever told you that sixty is crystallized senility? You're using your age as a crutch and a defense and I want you to stop it. Yugo, though he's younger, has been exposed to the Electro-Clarifier more than you have and, as a result, he is more tired, more crotchety, and, in my opinion, a great deal less in touch than you are. And rather childishly intense about the succession. Don't you see anything significant in this?"

"Age and overwork. That's significant."

"No, it's the Electro-Clarifier. It's having a long-term effect on the two of you."

Seldon said, after a pause, "I can't disprove that, Dors, but I don't see how it's possible. The Electro-Clarifier is an electromagnetic device, and while it produces an unusual field, it is still only a field of the type to which human beings are constantly exposed. It can't do any unusual harm. —In any case, we can't give up its use. There's no way of continuing to progress in the Project without it."

"Now, Hari, I must ask something of you and you must cooperate with me on this. Go nowhere outside the Project without telling me, and do nothing out of the ordinary without telling me. Do you understand?"

"Dors, how can I agree to this? You're trying to put me into a straitjacket."

"It's just for a while. A few days. A week."

"What's going to happen in a few days or a week?"

Dors said, "Trust me. I will clear up everything."

25.

Hari Seldon knocked gently in an old-fashioned signal and Yugo Amaryl looked up. "Hari, how nice of you to drop around."

"I ought to do it oftener. In the old days, we were together all the time. Now there are hundreds of people to worry about, here, there and everywhere, and they get between us. —Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"The junta is going to set up a poll tax, a nice, substantial one. It will be announced on TrantorVision tomorrow. It will be just Trantor for now, and the Outer Worlds will have to wait. That's a little disappointing. I had hoped it would be Empire-wide all at once, but apparently I didn't give the general enough credit for caution."

Amaryl said, "Trantor will be enough. The Outer Worlds will know that their turn will follow in not too long a time."

"Now we'll have to see what happens."

"What will happen is that the shouting will start the instant the announcement is out and the riots will begin even before the new tax goes into effect."

"Are you sure of it?"

Amaryl put his Prime Radiant into action at once, and expanded the appropriate section. "See for yourself, Hari. I don't see how that can be misinterpreted, and that's the prediction under the particular circumstances that now exist. If it doesn't happen, it means that everything we've worked out in psychohistory is wrong, and I refuse to believe that."

"I'll try to have courage," said Seldon, smiling. Then, "How do you feel lately, Yugo?"

"Well enough. Reasonably well. —And how are you, by the way? I suddenly hear rumors that you're thinking of resigning. Even Dors said something about that."

"Pay no attention to Dors. These days she's saying all sorts of things.

She has a bug in her head about some sort of danger permeating the Project."

"What kind of danger?"

"It's better not to ask. She's just gone off on one of her tangents, and, as always, that makes her uncontrollable."

Amaryl said, "See the advantage I have in being single." Then, in a lower voice. "If you do resign, Hari, what are your plans for the future?"

Seldon said, "You'll take over. What other plans can I possibly have?"

And Amaryl smiled.

26.

In the small conference room in the main building, Tamwile Elar listened to Dors Venabili with a gathering look of confusion and anger on his face. Finally, he burst out, "Impossible!"

He rubbed his chin, then went on, cautiously. "I don't mean to offend you, Dr. Venabili, but your suggestions are ridic—cannot be right. There's no way in which anyone can think that there are in this Psychohistory Project any feelings so deadly as to justify your suspicions. I would certainly know if there were, and I assure you there are not. Don't think it."

"I do think it," said Dors, stubbornly, "and I can find evidence for it."

Elar said, "I don't know how to say this without offense, Dr. Venabili, but if a person is ingenious enough and intent enough on proving something, he can find all the evidence he wants—or, at least, something he believes is evidence."

"Do you think I'm paranoid?"

"I think that in your concern for the Maestro, something in which I'm with you all the way, you're, shall we say—overheated."

Dors considered. "At least, you're right that a person with sufficient ingenuity can find evidence anywhere. I can build a case against you, for instance."

Elar's eyes widened as he stared at her in total astonishment. "Against me? I would like to hear what case you can possibly have against me."

"Very well. You shall. The birthday party was your idea, wasn't it?"

Elar said, "I thought of it, yes, but I'm sure others did, too. With the Maestro moaning about his advancing years, it seemed a natural way of cheering him up."

"I'm sure others may have thought of it, but it was you who actually pressed it, and got my daughter-in-law fired up about it. She took over the details and you persuaded her it was possible to make a really large celebration. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know if I had any influence on her, but even if I did, what's wrong with that?"

"In itself, nothing, but in setting up so large and widespread and prolonged a celebration, were we not advertising to the rather unstable and suspicious men of the junta that Hari was too popular and might be a danger to them?"

"No one could possibly believe such a thing was in my mind."

Dors said, "I am merely pointing out the possibility. —In planning the birthday celebration, you suggested the central offices be cleared out—"

"Temporarily. For obvious reasons."

"—and insisted that they remain totally unoccupied for a while. No business."

"I didn't think it would hurt if the Maestro had some rest in advance of the party. Surely you can't complain about that."

"But it meant that you could consult with other people in the empty offices, and do so in total privacy. The offices are, of course, well-shielded."

"I did consult there—with your daughter-in-law, with caterers, suppliers, and other tradesmen. It was absolutely necessary, wouldn't you say?"

"And if one of those you consulted with was a member of the junta?"

Elar looked as though Dors had hit him. "I resent that, Dr. Venabili. What do you take me for?"

Venabili did not answer directly. She said, "You went on to talk to Dr. Seldon about his forthcoming meeting with the general and urged him, rather pressingly, to let you take his place and run the risks that might follow. The result was, of course, that Dr. Seldon insisted rather vehemently on seeing the general himself, which one can argue was precisely what you wanted him to do."

Elar emitted a short, nervous laugh. "With all respect, this does sound like paranoia, doctor."

Dors pressed on. "And then, after the party, it was you, wasn't it, who was the first to suggest that a group of us go to Dome's End Hotel?"

"Yes, and I remember you saying it was a good idea."

"Might it not have been suggested in order to make the junta uneasy, as yet another example of Hari's popularity? And might it not have been arranged to tempt me into the Palace Grounds?"

"Could I have stopped you?" said Elar, his incredulity giving way to anger. "You had made up your own mind there."

Venabili paid no attention, "And, of course, you hoped that in entering the Palace Grounds I might make sufficient trouble to turn the junta even farther against Hari."

"But why, Dr. Venabili? Why should I be doing this?"

"One might say it was to get rid of Dr. Seldon and to succeed him as Director of the Project."

"How can you possibly think this of me? I can't believe you are serious. You're just doing what you said you would at the start of this exercise—just showing me what can be done by an ingenious mind intent on finding so-called evidence."

"Let's turn to something else. I said that you were in a position to use the empty rooms for private conversations, and that you may have been there with a member of the junta."

"That is not even worth a denial."

"But you were overheard. A little girl wandered into the room, curled up in a chair out of sight, and overheard your conversation."

Elar frowned. "What did she hear?"

"She reported that two men were talking about death. She was only a child and could not repeat anything in detail, but two words did impress her, and they were 'lemonade death.' "

"Now you seem to be changing from fantasy to—if you'll excuse me—madness. What can 'lemonade death' mean, and what would it have to do with me?"

"My first thought was to take it literally. The girl in question is very fond of lemonade and there was a good deal of it at the party, but no one had poisoned it."

"Thanks for granting sanity that much."

"Then I realized the girl had heard something else, which her imperfect command of the language and her love of the beverage had perverted into 'lemonade.' "

"And have you invented a distortion?" Elar snorted.

"It did seem to me for a while that what she might have heard was 'laymen-aided death.' "

"What does that mean?"

"An assassination carried through by laymen—by non-mathematicians." Dors stopped and frowned. Her hand reached for her chest.

Elar said, in sudden concern, "Is something wrong, Dr. Venabili?"

"No," said Dors, seeming to shake herself.

For a few moments, she said nothing further, and Elar cleared his throat. There was no sign of amusement on his face any longer, as he said, "Your comments, Dr. Venabili, are growing steadily more ridiculous and—well, I don't care if I do offend you, but I have grown tired of them. Shall we put an end to this?"

"We are almost at an end, Dr. Elar. Layman-aided may indeed be ridiculous. I had decided that in my own mind, too—you are, in part, responsible, for the development of the Electro-Clarifier, aren't you?"

Elar seemed to stand straighter as he said, with a touch of pride, "Entirely responsible."

"Surely not entirely. I understand it was designed by Cinda Monay."

"A designer. She followed my instructions."

"A *layman*. The Electro-Clarifier is a *layman-aided* device."

With suppressed violence, Elar said, "I don't think I want to hear that phrase again. Once more, shall we put an end to this?"

Dors forged on, as if she hadn't heard his request. "Though you give her no credit now, you gave Cinda credit to her face—to keep her working eagerly, I suppose. She said you gave her credit and was very grateful because of it. She said you even called the device by her name and yours, though that's not the official name."

"Of course not. It's the Electro-Clarifier."

"And she said she was designing improvements, intensifiers and so on, and that you had the prototype of an advanced version of the new device for testing."

"What has all this to do with anything?"

"Since Dr. Seldon and Dr. Amaryl have been working with the Electro-Clarifier, both have in some ways deteriorated. Yugo, who works with it more, has also suffered more."

"The Electro-Clarifier can in no way do that kind of damage."

Dors put her hand to her forehead and, momentarily, winced. She said, "And now you have a more intense Electro-Clarifier that might do more damage, that might kill quickly, rather than slowly."

"Absolute nonsense."

"Now consider the name of the device, a name which, according to the woman who designed it, you are the only one to use. I presume you called it the Elar-Monay Clarifier."

"I don't ever recall using that phrase," said Elar, uneasily.

"Surely you did. And the new intensified Elar-Monay Clarifier could be used to kill with no blame to be attached to anyone—just a sad accident through a new and untried device. It would be the 'Elar-Monay death' and a little girl heard it as 'lemonade death.' "

Dors' hand groped at her side.

Elar said, softly, "You are not well, Dr. Venabili."

"I am perfectly well. Am I not correct?"

"Look, it doesn't matter what you can twist into lemonade. Who knows what the little girl may have heard? It all boils down to the deadliness of the Electro-Clarifier. Bring me into court or before a scientific investigating board and let experts, as many as you like, check the effect of the Electro-Clarifier, even the new intensified one, on human beings. They will find it has no measurable effect."

"I don't believe that," muttered Venabili. Her hands were now at her forehead and her eyes were closed. She swayed slightly.

Elar said, "It is clear that you are not well, Dr. Venabili. Perhaps that means it is my turn to talk. May I?"

Dors's eyes opened and she simply stared.

"I'll take silence for consent, doctor. Of what use could it be for me to try to to get rid of Dr. Seldon and Dr. Amaryl in order to take my place as Director? You would prevent any attempt I made at assassination, as you now think you are doing. In the unlikely case that I succeeded in such a project and was rid of the two great men, you would tear me to pieces afterward. You're a very unusual woman, strong and fast beyond belief, and while you are alive, the Maestro is safe."

"Yes," said Venabili, glowering.

"I told this to the men of the junta. —Why should they not consult me on matters involving the Project? They are very interested in psychohistory, as well they ought to be. It was difficult for them to believe what I told them about you, until you made your foray into the Palace Grounds. That convinced them, you can be sure, and they agreed with my plan."

"Aha. Now we come to it," Dors said weakly.

"I told you the Electro-Clarifier cannot harm human beings. It cannot. Amaryl and your precious Hari are just getting *old*, though you refuse to accept it. So what? They are fine—perfectly *human*. The electromagnetic fields have no effect of any importance on organic materials. Of course they may have adverse effects on sensitive electromagnetic machinery. And, if we could imagine a human being built of metal and electronics, it might have an effect on it. Legends tell us of such artificial human beings; the Mycogenians have based their religion on them, and they call such beings 'robots.' If there were such a thing as a robot, one would imagine it would be stronger and faster by far than an ordinary human being; that it would have properties, in fact, resembling those you have, Dr. Venabili. And such a robot could indeed be stopped, hurt, even destroyed by an intense Electro-Clarifier, such as the one that I have here, one that has been operating at low energy since we began our conversation. That is why you are feeling ill, Dr. Venabili, and for the first time in your existence, I'm sure."

Dors said nothing, merely stared at the other. Slowly, she sank into a chair. Elar smiled, and went on, "Of course, with you taken care of, there will be no problem with the Maestro and with Amaryl. The Maestro, in fact, without you, may fade out at once and resign in grief, while Amaryl is merely a child in his mind. In all likelihood, neither will have to be killed. How does it feel, Dr. Venabili, to be unmasked after all these years? I must admit, you were very good at concealing your true nature. It's almost surprising that no one else discovered the truth before now. But then, I am a brilliant mathematician—an observer, a thinker, a deducer. Even I would not have figured it out were it not for your fanatical devotion to the Maestro, and the occasional bursts of superhuman power you seemed to summon at will—when *he* was threatened.

"Say good-bye, Dr. Venabili. All I have to do now is to turn the device to full power and you will be *history*."

Dors seemed to collect herself and rose slowly from her seat, mumbling, "I may be better shielded than you think." Then, with a grunt, she threw herself at Elar.

Elar, his eyes widening, shrieked and reeled back.

Then Dors was on him, her hand flashing. Its side struck Elar's neck, smashing the vertebrae and shattering the nerve cord. He fell dead on the floor.

Dors straightened with an effort and staggered toward the door. She had to find Hari. He had to know what had happened.

27.

Hari Seldon rose from his seat in horror. He had never seen Dors look so, her face twisted, her body canted, staggering as though she were drunk.

"Dors! What happened! What's wrong!"

He ran to her and grasped her around the waist, even as her body gave way and collapsed in his arms. He lifted her (she weighed more than an ordinary woman her size would have, but Seldon was unaware of that at the moment) and placed her on the couch.

"What happened?" he said.

She told him, gasping, her voice breaking now and then, while he cradled her head and tried to force himself to believe what was happening.

"Elar is dead," she said. "I finally killed a human being. —First time. —Makes it worse."

"How badly are you damaged, Dors?"

"Badly. Elar turned on his device—full—when rushed him."

"You can be readjusted."

"How? There's no one—on Trantor—who knows how. I need Daneel."

Daneel. Demerzel. Somehow, deep inside, Hari had always known. His friend—a robot—had provided him with a protector—a robot—to ensure that psychohistory and the seeds of the Foundation were given a chance to take root. The only problem was, Hari had gone and fallen in love with his protector—Hari had fallen in love with a robot. It all made sense now; all the nagging doubts, the questions, could be answered. And somehow, it didn't matter one bit. All that mattered was Dors.

"We can't let this happen."

"It must." Dors's eyes fluttered open and she looked at Seldon. "Must. Tried to save you, but missed—vital point—who will protect you now?"

Seldon couldn't see her clearly. There was something wrong with his eyes. "Don't worry about me, Dors. It's you— It's you—"

"No. You, Hari. Tell Manella—Manella—I forgive her now. She did better than I. Explain to Wanda. You and Raych—take care of each other."

"No no no," said Seldon, rocking back and forth. "You can't do this. Hang on, Dors. Please. Please, my love."

Dors's head shook feebly and she smiled even more feebly. "Good-bye, Hari, my love. Remember always—all you did for me."

"I did nothing for you."

"You loved me and your love made me—human."

Her eyes remained open, but Dors had ceased functioning.

Yugo Amaryl came storming into Seldon's office. "Hari, the riots are beginning, sooner and harder even than exp—"

And then he stared at Seldon and Dors and whispered, "What happened?"

Seldon looked up at him in agony. "Riots! What do I care about riots now? —What do I care about *anything* now?" ●

DOWNTIME ON DIGGER'S WORLD

There's snarks up there beyond the dunes,
those blue dirt hills the mine threw up
and purple grass is turning back to soil.
We hunt them when the days go slack
just after Miner's Moon comes perigee,
just after Vorone sets, the littler moon.
The nights are silver dark and rage grass glows
to light our way whatever way we go.

You can't go straight; the crooked path alone,
the kind the blind or lame or wounded walk,
attracts the snark.
You have to go unerring slow
and listen for the low, wet chuffle of their jaws,
the scrape of rage grass on their scales, the claws'
sharp clicks come scuttling in behind,
the drag & ruffle of their tails
before they pounce.

You have to wheel and plant
your sticker's butt end in the ground
just as they leap and stand
a little further down the shaft
than their claws reach when wild with pain,
impaled, they snag and clutch for you.

It's not the skins we go for as you think,
though any living's good when work is slow;
it's that stuck through but not quite dead
to lure you close, with their last breath,
they sing.
They *sing!*

—William John Watkins

ON BOOKS

by
Norman Spinrad

PLOT, STORY, AND STRUCTURE

LAST CALL,
Tim Powers
Morrow, $22.00, 512 pp.
THE TRINITY PARADOX,
Kevin J. Anderson & Doug Beason
Bantam Spectra, $4.99, 325 pp.
WULFSYARN,
Phillip Mann
AvoNova/Morrow, $22.00, 356 pp.
THE DARK BEYOND THE STARS,
Frank M. Robinson
Tor, $19.95, 408 pp.
ELVISSEY,
Jack Womack
Tor, $12.95, 320 pp.
USE OF WEAPONS,
Iain M. Banks
Bantam, $4.99, 389 pp.

It is certainly the hoariest shibboleth of literary pedagogy that every story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But must the author necessarily reveal them to the reader in that linear order?

So too has the so-called "plot skeleton" long served as the general armature over which generations of scriveners have slapped the clay of specificity to mass produce reliably satisfying commercial fiction. A sympathetic protagonist is confronted with a task or dilemma, tension mounts via a series of complications and/or setbacks, crests to a climactic resolution near the end of the work, which then quickly extros via a coda.

There was a time when a cardboard device called a "plot wheel" was actually marketed to assist blocked pulp hacks in coming up with stories. There were variations, but basically the thing consisted of a series of cardboard circles riveted together at a common center so they could rotate over each other. One wheel might have "protagonists" of various specific sorts printed on it, another "villains," a third "complications," a fourth "resolutions," and so forth. The wheels had a series of holes through which you could see the other wheels one word or phrase at a time.

You rotated the wheels over each other until the device produced a plot to your liking. Protagonist = cowboy, villain = mad doctor, setting = Mars, love interest = opera singer, complication = volcano eruption, resolution = sword fight, and hey presto, cowboy sword fighter rescues opera singer from mad doctor forcing her to use her vocal powers to set off an eruption of Olympia Mons.

These days, of course, television

has replaced pulp magazines, and software has replaced cardboard at much heftier prices. As a member of the Writers Guild of America, I receive the journal of that union of movie and TV writers, which, these days, is full of ads for such software products as "Story Line," "Dramatica," "Collaborator," and "Plots Unlimited."

These latter-day electronic incarnations of the old cardboard plot wheel that a desparate hack could have purchased for the price of a bottle of booze go for northwards of three hundred dollars a pop.

"Deliver professionally structured stories, whatever your writing style—Mystery, Comedy, Romance, Adventure or Science Fiction! Conquer Writers' Block! Reduce the time you spend plotting and structuring your original concepts! Start at any point in the writing process! Deep Sequence leads you beyond superficiality to find what your story is *really* about! Twenty-two Steps shape characters' actions into the twenty-two steps of every great story! Moral Sequence traces your hero's rise and fall!"

Really. I am not making this up.

Worse still, many TV and even feature film producers now apparently believe that this is the way cinematic fiction should actually be written, and since these are the people who buy the stuff, the equivalent of the old pulp magazine editors, and since they have reverse-engineered versions of the same sort of software to quantify the extent to which scripts submitted to them fulfill these standard sets of plot parameters, this is what tends to get bought, produced, and foisted off on the public.

What is wrong with the plot wheel and its far more lucrative software versions?

The answer is both simple and profound.

Contrary to advertising claims, what these gizmos are capable of generating are not *stories* but merely *plots*.

What is a plot?

A plot is a certain form that the structure of a story may take; that form, or, to be fair about it, subset of forms, that follow the general shape and modular construction of the plot skeleton and that may therefore be generated by software or even cardboardware.

You could save yourself a few hundred bucks by writing your own. In one file, list sympathetic character descriptions, in another villains, in a third love interests, in a fourth and fifth sidekicks and comic reliefs, if you want some bells and whistles. Other files list settings, complications, resolutions, and so forth. The master program is simply an ordered set of blank modules (Hero, Villain, Setting, Dilemma, Complication One, Complication Two, etc.) to be filled by items chosen from the appropriate data file by either a random number generator or the somewhat superfluous writer. You want to get cute about it, you could have genre filters for SF, Westerns, Romance, etc. between the programs and the files or different subsets of files for each genre.

Plotting is a science of a sort. It can be done by a moron–level expert system emulation of a writer, as detailed above.

What is a story?

That's not a question with a simple reductionist answer. A real story may indeed be structured like a conventional linear plot, but it certainly doesn't have to be, nor can a real story be generated by the plot wheel, Story Line, Plots Unlimited, or Spinrad's Unpatented Do-It-Yourself Plot Processing Program. Yet the product of any of the above is a soulless golem without one.

Am I getting mystical on you here?

Yes, I suppose I am. The creation of stories is not a science. It is an art. It is, I would contend, the essence of the literary art. It cannot be done on command by expert system emulations of writers no matter how puissant, for, alas, all too often it cannot be done on command by expert writers themselves. Stories percolate up from deep levels, from the interaction of the conscious mind, the subconscious, memory, the collective unconscious if you want to get Jungian about it. They grab you by the throat and demand to be told. Writers have about as much control over their genesis as they do over their dreams. Indeed, the creation of a real story can perhaps be best understood as dreaming in a wakeful state with one's hands on the keyboard.

And believe me, writing gurus and software snake-oil salesmen to the contrary, any real writer will tell you that a good story will get you through times of no plot better than expert plotting will get you through times of no story!

One cannot deal with *story* schematically, the way one can parse out plot. Indeed, many excellent stories sound lame indeed when one attempts to squeeze them into the plot skeleton of Procrustes.

Take, say, the plot of *Last Call* by Tim Powers. Scott Crane, sympathetic protagonist, ex-gambler, accompanied by assorted sidekicks and love interest, is stepwise, via a series of complications, inveigled into a climactic poker-game for the fate of the Earth with his natural father, the secret master of cosmic evil. He wins the hand, saves the universe, and gets the girl.

That's the plot. It's a pretty straightforward linear one of the sort that might indeed have been generated by a good enough plot wheel, and it's too late to stop me if you've heard it before.

The *story*, however . . .

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your software, and one of them is Las Vegas.

Last Call is a kind of mystical novel about the heart of Las Vegas, and if you, like me, have always believed that the essence of Vegas was its very lack of heart, maybe you should read this book and let Powers tell you the story of how this is both true and not true and why.

Yes, this is a fantasy novel, literally a long poker game between the forces of good and the forces of evil played with a Tarot deck for the usual ultimate stakes. But it is also in some elusive way one of the most realistic novels about Las Vegas that I have ever read.

After all, in conventional mimetic terms, it's not exactly possible to write a realistic novel about Las Vegas, since Las Vegas itself is such a surrealistic landscape, architecturally and psychically, the Disneyland of Greed presided over by a giant Mammon in a neon Mickey Mouse suit, as it were. Thus, only fantasy can treat this venue realistically in a certain sense. A cosmic poker game played with a marked Tarot deck is somehow both a perfect extended metaphor for the story of Vegas and in a weird way literally the truth.

Nor would I have believed it possible to love Vegas before I read this book.

But Tim Powers, I think, does. Sort of. Or at least has enough of an emotionally ambiguous relationship with Vegas to not only render its ambiance and some of its history in telling and vivid detail but to emphatically explicate its essential soul, such as it is. And thereby hangs this tale.

And if you are willing to bet you can generate *this* kind of story with even a 5 megabyte software plot wheel, you're faded, sucker!

Of course history itself may serve not only as the ultimate plot wheel but even as a source of that elusive something called story.

This, after all, is more or less the definition of historical fiction, and it is interesting to consider en passant that the French, who have two different words for power, and linguistically split all sorts of other philosophical hairs that Anglophones do not, have no word for "history" save "histoire," which also means "story" in French. The notion that history is a series of dramatic tales is thus hardwired into the language itself.

The literary appeal of such tales based on either real historical events or real historical people or both, at least for the historically literate, certainly cannot reside in plot twist or uncertainty as to what result the climactic resolution will bring, at least not in terms of the pre-ordained sequences of events.

The esthetic pleasure of reading such stuff lies in the manner in which the author reorders, reinterprets, illumines, personalizes "histoire" as history, as plot that we already know, and transforms it into "histoire" as story, as a tale capable of touching and surprising the human heart.

Thus, in a sense, successful mimetic historical fiction provides as clear cut a distinction between plot and story as it is possible to obtain in the literary laboratory.

Science fiction, however, via its offshoot the alternate world story, goes historical fiction one better and perhaps confuses the issue by ringing changes on the historical givens *themselves* for literary effect. Here the speculative story, in a certain sense, need not follow the historical plot, indeed perhaps cannot, and interest resides precisely in how the former comments upon and illumines the real events of the latter from fresh perspectives.

The historical plot of *The Trinity Paradox* by Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason, for example, is a familiar one, at least in the set-up, namely the development of the first atomic bomb during World War II in New Mexico.

Real historical figures. The real setting. Real science. Anderson and Beason have certainly done plenty of homework, more than enough to have written a straightforward mimetic historical novel about the Manhattan Project and gotten inside the heads of the historical personages involved well enough to have turned such a predetermined plot into a humanly compelling story.

Indeed, in a certain sense they have done it. Oppenheimer, Feynman, Fermi, Groves, and other real people do come alive in their hands, and the ambiance seems both authentic and psychologically real.

But that's not what the story of *The Trinity Paradox* is really about, though it's not quite *not* what it's about either.

Via an experimental screw-up, contemporary physicist and leftist anti-nuclear activist Elizabeth Devane gets time-warped back to wartime Los Alamos where she wangles herself a job as a lowly WAC flunky in the Manhattan Project.

Well, plotwise, you can guess what's going to happen. Elizabeth, armed with historical foreknowledge of Hiroshima, the hydrogen bomb, the Cold War, and all that is to follow, and politically and psychologically committed beforehand to seeing all that as a chamber of horrors, is going to try to abort it. And the title being *The Trinity Paradox*, her superior *scientific* knowledge is going to work against her political goals, and she will probably end up creating an alternate world not exactly to her liking. . . .

But *storywise*, *The Trinity Paradox* is a good deal more subtle and interesting.

For one thing, Anderson and Beason have dropped a 1990s feminine consciousness back into the 1940s, and while the disjunctions are nowhere near as broad as, say, Mark Twain dropping a nineteenth century Connecticut Yankee back into King Arthur's Court, the subtleties are interesting indeed, all the more so because Elizabeth Devane is a fictional physicist from our present interacting with real physicists from our recent historical past.

For a woman from the 1990s, the wartime United States of the 1940s is, if not quite a Porker Palace nightmare, a time and a place where the subtleties of male chauvinism are both glaringly apparent and impossible to directly confront. Worse still for a female *physicist*, a breed which hardly existed in a 1940s timeframe, and whose scientific superiority can hardly be used to transcend the socially ordained roles under the circumstance.

Juicier still, Anderson and Beason give us this fictional character, with her modern knowledge and her modern psyche, in interaction with real historical figures like General Leslie Groves, Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynman, whose physics, whose social assumptions, whose personalities, are the products of the wartime atmosphere of the 1940s.

Thus, paradoxically enough, by sending this woman of the 1990s, this contemporary physicist, this anti-nuclear activist, back into the 1940s to confront the subtle male chauvinism of wartime America and the 1940s consciousness of real figures in the scientific history of the times, Anderson and Beason are able to paint a kind of characterological and psychological portrait of the *real historical* Manhattan Project and the real people involved in a way not quite possible to the conventional historical novel.

By showing us this pivotal historical drama and the people involved through the eyes of such a viewpoint character, they are able to comment upon the world in which it takes place from the vantage of both scientific and cultural hindsight and the contemporary worldview of the 1940s. And by showing how Elizabeth's attempts at altering history change the plot of the story we all know from the history books, and not necessarily according to her or our heart's desire, they are able to illumine certain of the moral and political questions surrounding the historical Manhattan Project and tormenting the souls of many of the scientists involved.

Paradoxically enough for a novel of mutable time-lines, *The Trinity Paradox* follows a pretty conventional linear structure, commencing at the beginning of the plot with Elizabeth's time-warping back to the 1940s and proceeding through the middle to conclude with the end.

This, however, certainly need not always be the case, and perhaps nothing better explicates the difference between plot and story than the many ways in which good stories can violate the linear plot structure to satisfying literary effect.

Not only can you begin somewhere other than the beginning of the plot and conclude somewhere other than the end, you can even, at least up to a point, give away the ending of the plot on the first page and still write a story that works.

Wulfsyarn, by Phillip Mann, does just this even before the "Preface," where, on a kind of frontispiece page, it sets out its thematic premise via a quote from a poem by C.P. Cavafy, and then proceeds to summarize the entire plot of what is to come in five short paragraphs:

"The *Nightingale* was the most advanced ship in the entire fleet of Mercy ships belonging to the Gentle Order of St. Francis Dionysos. On its maiden voyage, its life bays packed with refugees, the *Nightingale* disappeared.

"Despite the most strenuous efforts of the Gentle Order of St. Francis Dionysos, no trace of the ship could be found.

"Then, almost a year to the day after its disappearance, a distress signal was heard and the *Nightingale* was recovered. It was damaged in ways that meant that its very survival in space was a miracle. However, of its precious cargo of life-forms there was no trace. Only one creature remained alive within the ship and that was its Captain, Jon Wilberfoss.

"This is the story of *Nightingale* and of Jon Wilberfoss.

"It is told by Wulf, the autoscribe."

Plotwise, at least linearly speaking, Mann gives it all away literally up front.

Of course, this can be an entrée into one of the basic mystery plot variants, in which the question is not whodunit, but just what exactly *really* happened, and why, and the protagonist, rather than being the detective ferreting out the perpetrator from a field of possible suspects, becomes a kind of psychic sleuth seeking out the true meaning of an already-known skein of events.

In terms of plot at least, *Wulfsyarn* is structured like this sort of mystery story. Wilberfoss, in a state of severe shock, is brought to the Poverello Garden in the Pacifico Monastery of the Order of St. Francis Dionysos on the planet Juniper to be nursed by Lily and gently interrogated in a subtle manner by Wulf, who more or less serves as Mann's auctorial voice.

Yet on a story level, somehow, *Wulfsyarn* is not really an SF-mystery hybrid. Lily is a kind of medical robot, and Wulf is, well, an autoscribe, a robotic recording and transcribing device. But just as plot descriptions may miss the true point of story, such hardware descriptions miss the point of consciousness.

Wulf and Lily are centuries old, have witnessed many phases of Mann's complex galactic history, and while Lily, seen from a distance, may not have much personality, Wulf, our narrator, seen from its own interior, is a fully conscious entity, if not exactly a human consciousness, with vast historical memories, puissant erudition, a fine sense of irony, and its protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, a complex emotional life, as befits its position as Mann's spokescreature.

Whether Wulf or Wilberfoss is really the protagonist is one of those interesting but perhaps ultimately unanswerable questions. *Wulfsyarn* is indeed the story of the *Nightingale* and of Jon Wilberfoss, but it is also, well, Wulf's yarn.

Wulf introduces itself as the author in the Preface, steps out of the more or less conventional third-person narration of the events of Wilberfoss's tale to address the reader directly from time to time, and while we do get Wilberfoss narrating scenes directly himself, the closest we get to Wilberfoss' consciousness is what he tells us in his conversations with Wulf. And in Wulf's third-person narration of extended scenes, we see Wilberfoss' psyche only through a glass darkly, via Wulf's conjectural commentary.

Thus, Jon Wilberfoss remains a somewhat remote and psychically distant figure all the way through, while Wulf's consciousness is immediate to the reader, amusing us with its irony, charming us with its erudition as a raconteur.

You will notice that Phillip Mann gave the plot outline of his novel on the very first page and I have now described *Wulfsyarn* at some length without either of us really having given the denouement away; namely what happened to the *Nightingale*, why is Wilberfoss the only survivor, what happened to his psyche in the process and why, and what is his ultimate fate.

Having expended this much energy differentiating story from plot, I must admit that most if not all stories depend for their full enjoyment upon a certain linear structural tension which is lost when a critic gives the true story denouement away, and I'm not going to vitiate your enjoyment of this fine novel for you by doing it here, any more than Phillip Mann does in his five paragraph opening plot summary to his own book.

I say "vitiate" rather than "ruin" because, while narrative tension and hence a measure of the reader's enjoyment would indeed be lost by giving the denouement away before Mann reveals it in his own sweet time, another large measure of the novel's enjoyment would not.

Wulfsyarn, thanks in part to the nature of its narrator, is a richly discursive novel, meaning that there's not only a lot more of interest than the plot, but, indeed, a lot more of interest than the story itself.

Mann's galactic culture has a long history. Wulf remembers a good deal of it, has its own esthetic, philosophical, and psychic axes to grind, is in no particular hurry to get from point A to point B in the story, and discourses throughout on various historical, cultural, and even mystical matters in interesting detail.

Well, I suppose you like this sort of thing or you do not. A hard-nosed pulp-hack would probably disdain such leisurely discursiveness as "padding" and hector the author to get back to the action. And indeed, from this point of view, the story of the wreck of the *Nightingale* might be confined succinctly within a 15,000 word action-adventure novelette.

Yes, I suppose you'd have to say that *Wulfsyarn* is, well, literature; a mode of tale-telling in which commentary, asides, meditations upon the meaning of what is happening, may receive as much emphasis as the description of the actual events.

On the other hand, it most definitely is also science fiction; a mode of tale-telling in which the detailed portrayal of a richly imagined alternate or future universe may be at least half of the pleasure of the reading experience, as it is here.

And indeed one might go even further to say that science fiction, therefore, with its almost inevitable need to lay in imaginary background—physical, intellectual, historical, even spiritual—even when a straightforward plot is the structure, is the ideal content for the discursive novel, and that the discursive mode is at least in some sense ideal for the production of science fiction of literary value.

Be that as it may, even something like Frank M. Robinson's *The Dark Beyond the Stars*, superficially a modern version of the Good Old Pulp Stuff, fast-moving linear structure and all, ends up being a far deeper story than any plot summary could make it seem.

In fact the plot would seem to be one of the oldest chestnuts in the genre canon. The *Archon* is a slower-than-light generational starship that has been out there for generations searching unsuccessfully for a living planet other than the Earth. Via genetic engineering, its Captain, Michael Kusaka, has been rendered virtually immortal. He has commanded the ship since it left the Earth, and is under psychic compulsion to push eternally on.

The *Archon*'s systems are slowly degenerating, and now it must cross a vast starless Dark or turn back. Rational calculations say that it just can't make it across, and even if it could, all of its current generation save the captain would die a hopeless death in the void before it did.

Factions of course develop, there is a mutiny, against which the Captain struggles, and there is a climactic outcome whose nature it would be unfair to reveal.

You've probably read this one a few times before. I certainly have, starting with Robert A. Heinlein's *Universe*, the ur-template. Brian Aldiss, A.E. Van Vogt, Clifford Simak, among many others, have done their variations. I've done one myself, and Harlan Ellison even created an episodic TV series, *The Starlost*, based on the generation ship schtick.

However, summarizing the familiar plot of *The Dark Beyond the Stars* does not tell the story.

The entire novel is narrated in first person, and not by Captain Michael Kusaka but by a young man named Sparrow who remembers only the seeming moment of his death.

Yes, Robinson uses this first person ingenue viewpoint character to allow the reader to explore the generation ship and its complex and admirably worked out society with the ideal balance of naïvete and knowledge. And yes, you guessed it, Sparrow will be drawn into the deepest levels of the conflict between the Captain and the mutineers as the novel builds to its climax.

However . . .

However, here I am skating the knife edge of the critic's dilemma of not wanting to spoil the book for readers by giving too much away but finding myself unable to convey the nature of the story without risking such revelation.

Well, suffice it to say, as you will have guessed anyway from the set-up, while the plot centers around the conflict between Kusaka and the mutineers over whether to go back or sail on into the Dark, the *story*, that is *Sparrow's* story, the story of the consciousness narrating the novel in first person, is of course the story of the search for his true identity.

Nor, I think, is it giving too much away to say that more than one layer of the onion must be peeled away before what lies at the core of his being is revealed. Nor that Sparrow's true identity, at the end, is not what he, and at least this reader, has supposed.

What Frank Robinson has done here is use one of the standard SF plot tropes to tell a highly unconventional story, a weird sort of inside-out bildungsroman, in which the seemingly naïve young ingenue, rather than evolving toward his maturity via the events of the tale, descends, if that is the word, deeper and deeper into the underworld of his lost identity's complexities, uncovering new truths about his true nature, the true nature of his society, and his true place within it as he proceeds toward a kind of retrospective apotheosis.

Jack Womack's first three novels, *Ambient*, *Terraplane*, and *Heathern*, established him as perhaps *the* emergent prose stylist in the science fiction genre of the last few years, a writer of depth, power, and serious literary intent, who would seem to have well understood the difference between plot and story. That is the good news.

The bad news is that Womack

entered the field at a time when the commercial pressure to write series novels was and is enormous. His first novel, *Ambient* somehow became the first in a planned series of six, *Terraplane* and *Heathern* being #2 and #3.

To be fair about it, while *Terraplane* was not quite up to *Ambient*, and *Heathern* was not quite up to *Terraplane*, these two sequels were good, even excellent, novels which had workable self-contained structures, told interesting stories, and could be read independently.

While the three of them were all set in the same fictional universe, or rather the same future and the same alternate past, and while together they tell the story of the same world-dominating corporate entity, Dryco, and while the events of each of them impinge on the others in a minor key, Womack was able to avoid most of the obvious pitfalls of the novel series by bringing a different cast of characters front and center in each of them.

Obvious pitfalls?

What makes a novel series a novel series? In a word, *continuity*—a consistent fictional universe from book to book, and, much more often than not, a continuing cast of characters.

What makes a satisfying tale? In plot terms, a beginning, middle, and end, whether presented in a linear sequence or not. In story terms, something structurally similar called *closure*—a sense, after reading the final pages, that the structure has completed itself in an esthetically satisfying manner, that the thematic issues raised have been thematically resolved, that the characters have reached whatever epiphanies they may have been headed for, and that the conventional plot, if there is one, has reached its climax. In sum, that the story is *complete*.

Obviously, then, the structural imperative of the successful stand-alone story, namely closure, is in conflict with the structural imperative of the episodic series, whether the episodes in question are short stories, TV shows, or novels, namely continuity from one episode to the next.

One way to resolve this paradox is to conceive of the entire series as one structural whole, such as Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, or the TV series "The Prisoner." The problem with that is that someone who comes in in the middle probably won't know what the hell is going on. Another, more rarely used, and much more ambitious strategy is to do what Womack has done and tell self-contained stories with new casts of characters in each episode, while aiming for (at least one hopes) a kind of overall fugal structure to the novel series, in which the completed whole is somehow greater than the sum of its free-standing parts.

Achieving such an effect, however, is a son of a bitch, and has been brought off only a few times in the history of world literature at large. One thinks of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, the entire oeuvre of Cordwainer Smith taken as a whole, Richard Wagner's operatic Ring cycle, if you really want to stretch a point, and not much else.

Elvissey, the fourth book in Jack Womack's Dryco series, illustrates why.

Plotwise, it would certainly seem, well, vivid. Dryco, now rebuilding the world and trying to institutionally reform itself, sends two minions, John and Isabel, husband and wife, reconditioned security heavy and special projects flak, over to the alternate Earth, now proceeding through its alternate 1950s, to pluck out that world's young version of the dead charismatic Christ-figure of theirs, so as to use him to steer the vast mass of his followers along the corporately desired vector.

Namely a murderous redneck creep named Elvis Presley.

The bulk of the plot consists of the retrieval of Elvis from the alternate Earth, his conditioning to the service of Dryco, and the climactic "Elvissey" in London where they trot him on to rather disastrous results.

Isabel is the first person narrator, which allows Womack to employ yet another subtle variation of the idiosyncratic prose style that he has developed for this universe in the previous three books. The story is basically hers, the disintegration of her marriage to John, his own decline, and her relationship with the alternate Elvis.

There would certainly seem to be the makings of a good novel here, a fine one, even; I mean, an alternate Elvis as a major character, psychological depth, a real personal story, experimental prose, and all. . . .

But somehow it never comes off. *Elvissey* seems to creak and groan under the structural weight of the previous three novels, to bend itself out of shape, perhaps, to fit in with the architecture of what is to come.

The bizarre prose, which admirably serves as a gateway into Womack's universe in the first three books, seems to simply cloud meaning and obscure description for about the first third of *Elvissey*, not really paying off until John and Isabel are back in the alternate 1950s dealing with Elvis, where it admirably contrasts the consciousness styles of these two realities, and the novel begins to take off.

It builds nicely once they have Elvis back in the future, but then falls apart in about the last quarter of the book, when they drag him to London for the climactic "Elvissey."

For one thing, the Elvissey is, among other things, an "Elviscon," which Womack uses to do a rather low comic take on SF cons, and for another, it is embedded in a future London whose cartoon reality is totally at variance with the bizarre but somehow believable future New York and alternate American 1950s which Womack creates in the rest of the book, and for that matter, in the other books in the series.

I *have* read the previous three Dryco novels, and I had trouble connecting up with this one; what a reader who came to *Elvissey* cold would make of it is difficult for me to imagine.

There's a plot here, all right, but without an appreciation of what Elvis means to Womack's fictional universe gleaned from the first three books, it comes off as just plain silly, a thin excuse to do a piss-take on London and SF cons.

There's potentially an interesting story in the triangle between

Isabel, John, and Elvis, but without a real understanding of this culture gained from reading what has gone before, it doesn't make much emotional or cultural sense. Without the detail, fullness and history provided by the first three books, Womack's future New York seems rather depthless in this one, merely weird.

Four books into this projected six-book series, Jack Womack seems to have become lost in his own backstory and structural complexities, losing sight of the textural details of the trees in the effort to fit the latest thicket into the pattern of the forest, losing consistency of tone, losing, ultimately, perhaps, a clear focus on who his ideal reader is—someone who has read the first three books, or someone coming to this one cold. In the effort to orient the latter without boring the former with the weight of rebuilding his world yet a fourth time, he ends up with something that satisfies neither.

Perhaps Jack Womack has simply bitten off more than anyone can chew. Certainly the dearth of series which have succeeded in resolving the artistic paradox inherent in the most ambitious version of the form would seem to indicate the near impossibility of having this literary layer cake and eating it too.

With *Use of Weapons*, however, Iain M. Banks, paradoxically enough, opts for settling for less, and thereby accomplishes more.

Use of Weapons is part of a kind of series, too, but with several differences. It includes short stories as well as novels. Like Womack's Dryco series, each episode is a free-standing story with its own cast of characters. Unlike Womack's series, however, Banks's seems neither to be building to a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, nor to have a concluding episode in mind.

Basically Banks seems to have created not much more than a place and a time in which to set certain stories and novels when the spirit moves him, much as Rudyard Kipling set free-standing tales in nineteenth century India, Louis L'Amour used the American West of roughly the same period, or, for that matter, as so many contemporary novelists use the United States in the last half of the twentieth century.

The difference, of course, being that Banks is making it all up, and, I suspect, making it all up as he goes along. The canvas is vast—a galaxy-spanning civilization, or rather a galaxy teeming with civilizations, human and otherwise, where immense sentient starships can have populations of millions. Nor are they the only forms of non-biological sentience.

It's a rather anarchic galaxy too, and one of the few overall institutions that more or less spans it is an elusive something that simply calls itself the Culture. It is the Culture which operates most of the sentient starships, or maybe it's the Ship Minds which run the Culture. It's not a government, it's not a military organization, it's not a kind of galactic CIA or United Nations, though on the other hand, it *is* sort of all of these things combined.

What it is is the galaxy's highest civilization, at least in its own high opinion of itself, Ship Minds, billions of people, operatives at all sorts of levels, meddling in the affairs of lesser breeds beyond the law, clandestinely or overtly, in the service of its own elusive concept of the greater good.

If this seems vast, and vague, and not entirely comprehensible, well, it is. Unlike the historical novelist or the contemporary novelist, whose choice of time and place is a matter of selective restriction, Banks has sketched out a span of history longer than that of what we consider the human race, and a place wide enough for all practical purposes as to be literally infinite.

All that really ties it all together is the concept of the Culture itself, a broad outline of galactic history, a set of characteristic artifacts like the gigantic starships, and a reasonably consistent technology. What Banks has created for himself is simply a background template without a confining overall structure or backstory.

He can more or less go where and when he wants to and make up any planetary culture that serves his current literary purpose. More is less in terms of a fictional universe so vast as to eliminate the need to summarize anything that has taken place in a previous episode. Less is more in terms of freeing any of the tales from plot or story restraints imposed by series format requirements.

The plot of *Use of Weapons* is both simple and complex. It is Culture operative Dizient Sma's mission to seek out Cheradenine Zakalwe and persuade him in turn to undertake a mission to the Voerenhutz cluster to avert the political outcome of a war that the Culture deems counterproductive. That is the simple of it.

The complex of it is that Zakalwe is not a born and bred citizen of the Culture but a kind of back-planet mercenary given long life by the Culture way back when in return for services rendered who has served as their secret agent under more identities on more planets doing more incomprehensible dirty work that he can or cares to remember. The last time he worked for Sma, all he wanted out of her was the location of his sister Livueta, who detests him, and continuously flees from any attempt at contact.

The further complexities of plot concern the contortions Sma has to go through to finally recruit Zakalwe for the mission to Voerenhutz, and the ins and outs and dirty deeds of what he does when he gets there.

That's the linear plot summary. But the story Banks is telling is not linear at all. Structurally, it proceeds in flashbacks, flash-forwards, time-loops, and so forth, to paint an exceedingly complex four-dimensional picture of Zakalwe's long checkered career as a mercenary secret agent of the Culture and of his relationship with Sma, his recruiter and handler.

On an obvious level, *Use of Weapons* refers to Zakalwe's formidable mastery of weaponry, martial arts, espionage, dirty tricks, and political judo. On a less obvious level, Zakalwe is but a weapon being used by Sma, by the Culture, in ways he scarcely understands, for ends to which he is largely indifferent when he knows them or even hostile when he doesn't.

Only when we get to the very core of Zakalwe's nested series of identities do we fully realize why Banks has chosen this temporally non-linear structure, do we realize that even the recomplicated espionage plot has been rather peripheral to the true story, the climax of which is at the beginning of the time-line of his life's tale, not the end.

For only then do plot, story, and structure come together in exemplary fashion to reveal the ultimate meaning and bitter irony of the title, the horrible secret hidden from Zakalwe by both Sma and the labyrinth of his own psyche, the monstrous truth that has enabled the Culture to cynically use him as the human weapon that he has become.

Yes, every successful story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. No, there is no particular reason why they must be revealed to the reader in that linear order.

And once in a while, the reader doesn't even have to know which is even which until the storyteller's final veil is removed. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 138)

Esther M. Friesner takes us slumming through the colorful Underworld of New York City, in a hilarious excursion through Damon Runyon territory that introduces us to some very strange "Lowlifes"; Nebula Award-winner **Michael Swanwick,** one of our most popular authors, returns to give us a vivid look—or, rather, a sequence of different looks—at a World Famous Artist, seen here as you've never seen him before, in the wry "Picasso Deconstructed: Eleven Still-Lifes"; exciting new writer **Diane Mapes** investigates all those subjects That Man Was Not Meant To Know About, with some very funny results, in the gonzo "Globsters"; **Robert Reed** takes us to the bottom of the sea on a monster hunt, and reminds us that the problem with monster hunts is that sometimes you find the monster, in the suspenseful "Blind"; new writer **Patricia Anthony** takes us to a grim future world where desperate people are waiting impatiently for "The Last Flight from Llano"; new writer **David Marusek** makes a brilliant *Asimov's* debut with a subtle yet powerfully moving study of how "The Earth Is On the Mend"; and **John Griesemer** returns with a whimsical look at "Steam." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our exciting May issue on sale on your newsstands on March 30, 1993, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of what we have in store for you!

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by Erwin S. Strauss

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MARCH 1993

4-7—**AstronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 1701, Rochester NY 14603.** Or phone: **(716) 342-4697** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Rochester NY (if city omitted, same as in address) Guests will include: Swanwick, Kress, Lewitt, S. Sterling, M. Donnelly, Foglio, Gundersons.

5-7—**WisCon. (608) 231-2324.** Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Bujold, Rusch. Feminism & SF.

5-7—**ConDor. (619) 291-7131.** Town & Country Hotel, San Diego CA. O. Butler, J.M. Straczynski.

5-7—**ConFlation. (314) 726-5400.** Radisson, Clayton MO. Vic Milan, Michael Weaver. Age 21 and up.

12-14—**ST Con.** Calgary AB. At the Ramada. "Star Trek: The Next Generation" producer R. Moore.

12-14—**WolfCon. (902) 542-9306.** Wolfville NS. Medieval, Arthurian/Celtic, media con. New dates.

12-14—**RevelCon. (713) 526-5625.** Houston TX. No more news as of press time on this relax-a-con.

19-21—**CrackerCon, Box 8356, Jacksonville FL 32239.** Baymeadows Holiday Inn. Bova, W. Miller Jr.

19-21—**MillenniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405. (513) 294-1997.** Roger MacBride Allen, Maia Cowan.

19-21—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Card, Shaw, Gilliland, Curtis.

19-21—**NeoCon, Box 48431, Wichita KS 67201. (316) 687-6424.** Hilton. Tucker, Farran, Hodgson.

25-28—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Red Lion, Bellevue WA. McCaffrey.

26-28—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 270-1312.** Howard Johnson's. Reichert.

26-28—**MidSouthCon, Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122. (901) 274-7355, 763-3629.** A.D. Foster, Tucker.

26-28—**OurCon, ℅ M. Warner, Box 2062, Huntsville, AL 33815.** Mercedes (Misty) Lackey. Off campus.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

JULY 1995

13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** North American SF Con (NASFiC).

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Convention. US$65.

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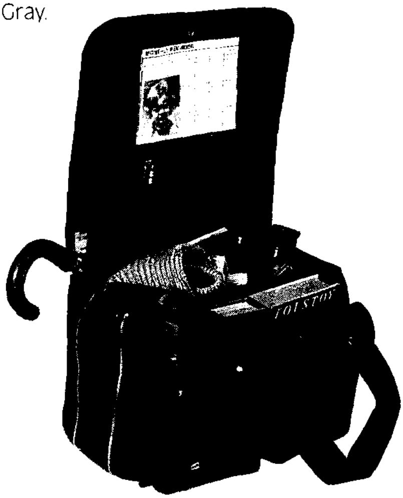

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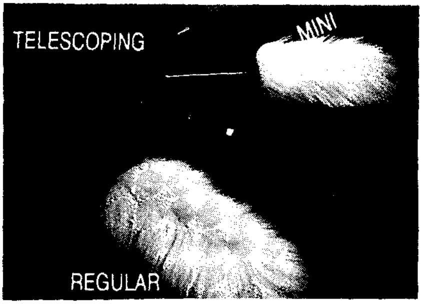

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